Refrain KURUMI

SpiritNo.3
AstralDress-NightmareType　Weapon-ClockType[Zafkiel]

デート・ア・ライブ

DATE A LIVE

狂三リフレイン

橘公司
The author
Koushi Tachibana

16

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「――のために――死んでくださいまし」
「ええ、ええ、喜んで」
「さあ、さあ、参りましょう」
「もとよりこの身は仮初めの命」
「存分に使い潰してくださいまし」
「この命が『わたくし』の礎になるならば」
「喜んで彼岸へと参りましょう」
「今さら可笑しなことを仰いますわ」
「『わたくし』もわたくしなれば」
「断ることなどありえないとわかるでしょうに」
「――ならば。わたくしに付いてきてくださいまし、『わたくしたち』。
この、先のない死出の旅に」

『頑張る』
精霊――鳶一折紙
「――とにかく、チョコを溶かすわよ。そう難しく考える必要はないわ」
《ラタトスク》司令官――五河琴里
「琴里、ここからどうすればいいのだ？んぐんぐ」
精霊――夜刀神十香
「うふふ、では士道さんのハートはわたくしが独り占めですわね」
精霊――時崎狂三
製菓用チョコレート

「――わたくしの霊力（いのち）以外のすべてを、
あなたに、捧げますわ」

「ようやく、
全てが繋がりましたわ」

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精霊
THE SPIRIT
隣界に存在する特殊災害指定生命体。発生原因、存在理由ともに不明。
こちらの世界に現れる際、空間震を発生させ、周囲に甚大な被害を及ぼす。
また、その戦闘能力は強大。
対処法1
WAYS OF COPING 1
武力を以てこれを殲滅する。
ただし前述の通り、非常に高い戦闘能力を持つため、達成は困難。
対処法2
WAYS OF COPING 2
――デートして、デレさせる。
狂三リフレイン
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Prologue - Ally of Justice

Tokisaki Kurumi was a kind-hearted young girl, and those who knew her praised her of being so as well. Born to a wealthy family, she was a silver-spoon Ojou-sama that was raised within the palms of doting parents. She had never been forced to contend with restrictions in liberty or any sort of discontent in her childhood; and so, seventeen years of her life ticked by just like that.

Neither hating nor hated by others, an exceedingly peaceful and steady life.

Within these halcyon days of pure bliss, it appeared that everyone regarded her lifestyle as just that, and she seemed to believe so herself too.

However, to say that she was entirely free of chagrin would be absolutely false.

——A bleary sense of helplessness.

Perhaps it originated from the unhampered amount of freedom she inherited ever since birth, or maybe it was simply due to her innate nature being such, but notions like these frequently entrenched themselves in Kurumi's heart.

Catching a glimpse of the encompassing world, many people could be seen facing a multitude of difficulties and hardships.

Some met their deaths as they were drawn into warfare, while others were already afflicted with terminal diseases before they could even breathe their first breath. Few possessed nothing but the rags on their backs, much less any morsels of food to fill their bellies – there were people treated with immensely jarring disparities. In this world, it was the cold-blooded winds that unmercifully billowed against the emaciated limbs of the weak.

She observed through television, newspapers, magazines——and even with her very eyes.

As Kurumi bore witness to those sufferings, a bitter feeling of helplessness plagued her heart.

Perhaps this was something that everyone underwent. Yet even though they were fully aware of the inexorable lack of emotion in this world, people had succumbed to that reality, disregarding the world's misfortune instead, which

they themselves were incapable of touching.

But Kurumi's heart, no matter how much time had elapsed, still preserved this matter.

Perhaps there is something I can do.

I want to lend a hand to those in need.

This innocent sense of righteousness was, on the bright side, pure and, on the other hand, naive.

This sentiment, which had taken root in her heart, was left unnoticed by everybody.

Possibly, it was precisely due to her personality that **it** happened.

——On that day.

That day had been an average one like any other.

Approximately 5 o'clock in the afternoon, Kurumi trod along the path home together with her friend, commanding a view of the setting orange sun while chatting idly.

"——About that, Sawa-san."

"Un?"

Being called out by Kurumi, her classmate Yamauchi Sawa tilted her head slightly with a blink of her eyes. She was a plain young girl with maroon colored hair tied together into three braids.

"Do you have any plans for tomorrow? If you're free, I'd like to pay a visit to your house."

"Okay. That'll be fine…… Ah, could it be that you wanted to pet Chestnut again?"

Sawa said with a light giggle. Chestnut was the name of a cat Sawa had bought home and raised. It was a cute American shorthair cat that was brazen and would even act playful with strangers it had met for the first time.

"I-It isn't like that. I… just wanted to study together with you……"

"Hehe, sure you do. Please come without fail. ——But since Kurumi-san is really

fond of cats, why don't you keep one yourself?"

Sawa's utterances caused Kurumi to furrow her brows.

"……My mother's allergic to cats."

"I see. Then you'll have to wait for your next life to raise one."

As she finished, Sawa grinned once again and waved her hand, heading in the direction of her own house afterwards.

Kurumi returned the gesture and bade farewell as she lingered until her friend's figure disappeared before she began her series of steps towards her home.

There was nothing to complain about a stable daily life. Her friend was also cared for under the wings of fate. She never stumbled across hardships, so her tone of speaking struck no false notes.

Following this, such a manner of living would undoubtedly continue. Even if an iota of fluctuation arose in the depths of Kurumi's heart, she seemed to keep ambling home as though to feign ignorance upon this aspect.

——Not long afterwards, she felt a bit indisposed.

"……Eh?"

After moving through several alleys, Kurumi broadened her eyes as she scanned her surroundings.

Unbeknown to her, the bustle of people, the noises of animals, and all sorts of sounds had vanished.

It was simply as if she had lost her way and wandered into another world.

Instantaneously, Kurumi had even drawn the conclusion that her ears were experiencing hearing difficulties for a moment there——but that was by far not the case. The rustling of her clothes' fabric created a friction that was still sonorously audible to her.

"What's… this……"

Despite her drowsiness, Kurumi carried on walking in order to leave that place.

However——

“What……”

She quickly halted in her tracks.

The reason was straightforward. Before her, an unidentified abnormality had manifested.

It resembled a pitch-black shadow congealed into a living, humanoid form. That creature’s body exuded a caliginous aura as it emitted what was failed to be described by screeches of lament and rage.

“Hya——!?”

That was obviously an out-of-the-ordinary existence.

Kurumi could not refrain from suppressing her breath, desperate to flee from there.

Nevertheless, her body, brimming with restlessness, did not act as she wished. With a twist of her foot, Kurumi toppled onto the ground on her backside.

“Kya……!”

“————————”

Then, as though perceiving Kurumi at last, the entity sluggishly closed in on the girl.

“No…… Don’t……!”

Kurumi was utterly unable to do anything, merely trembling with trepidation.

But——the next instant.

“……!?”

Kurumi’s field of vision was completely beleaguered by light. Right after a crude explosion had reverberated, the monster near her evaporated into thin air.

In its place stood a girl who looked as if she had switched places with it.

“——Are you all right?”

“Eh……Un——I’m… fine……”

Puzzled, Kurumi lifted her head with a few misgivings, her line of sight falling onto that girl's physique.

Her hair flowing in the wind, she was a young lady possessing regular features. An irresolute expression surfaced on her countenance, further elaborating her unfathomable ambiance.

She was adorned in a dazzlingly elegant and formal dress. Each and every one of these essential constituents portrayed her as an Angel or goddess.

Having gone astray from her pace, Kurumi finally understood. It was she who had defeated that umbrageous creature and rescued Kurumi.

"T-Thank you for saving me……"

As Kurumi showed her utmost gratitude with quivering words, the girl gradually extended her hand towards her.

Accepting the offer, Kurumi could be considered to have got up on her feet.

"But…… just now, what in the world……"

At Kurumi's enquiry, the girl hung down her eyes and spoke.

"——A Spirit. It is a creature whose purpose is to destroy this world."

"Spirit……"

"……Correct. Speaking of which, who might you be? Why have you appeared here?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. My name is Tokisaki Kurumi. As to why I'm here…… I'd like to know that as well to be honest."

After Kurumi's exposition, the young lady stroked her chin while murmuring a 'Hmm', as if showing signs of mulling over something.

"……Losing your way not of your own volition? Hnn, perhaps you've a compatible nature."

"Huh……?"

Kurumi inclined her head suspiciously and exclaimed. Afterwards, the girl stared directly into Kurumi's eyes.

“——Forgive me for the sudden question, Kurumi, but do you desire power?”

“……Power……?”

“……That’s right. A power like mine. Do you wish for it? You will without any doubt be harmonious with the nature of the Sephira crystal. If you are willing——I hope that you can save the world with me.”

“————”

Phrases absurd beyond belief were being verbalized.

A common person would definitely dismiss them with a laugh and harbor dubious suspicions.

And neither had Kurumi not surmised such.

However, what was by far more overpowering than that was the emotion deeply rooted within Kurumi’s heart, and it drove her to subconsciously lower her head forward.

“Great. With your help, we’ll have a hundredfold more power.”

The girl paused to smile for a while before continuing.

“——Pleased to make your acquaintance, Kurumi. I am Takamiya Mio, also known as……

an ally of Justice.”

Chapter 1 - Nightmare's Temptation

"Ku-rumi……"

It was not in his intention to utter that name.

The moment the girl in his line of sight came into view, both Shidou's attention and focus converged onto her figure like arrows honing in on a target. ——He had but uttered that name partly on ineluctable reflex.

The impression exuded by her towards others——was more than enough to captivate Shidou's vision and bottle it up forever.

Splendid hair as sable as black pearls.

Glossy skin with a luster like that of white porcelain.

A bewitching grin on cherry red lips.

And the faintly visible corner of a clockwork eye.

Such a description could portray just one person in this world.

——Kurumi. Tokisaki Kurumi.

The 'Worst Spirit', capable of manipulating time using her Angel, <Zafkiel>.

The Spirit who had emerged before Shidou and the others innumerable times, targeted their lives, even alternating between standing against and with them time and again, was there.

"But, why——"

That fragment of a sentence spewed out of his mouth.

Where she had loomed constituted neither a secluded aley late in the evening nor one of the plights Shidou fell into after being besieged by the enemy—— This was classroom 2-4 of Shidou's high school.

The embodiment of abnormality sat in a way which personified the everyday norm. Such an unbalancing presence made him quench the drought in his throat

with his own saliva.

"——Fufu."

Perched atop a chair, Kurumi eased her face with satire as she engrossed herself in Shidou's reaction.

"Why…? What an odd question to ask, Shidou-san. Don't you have anything else to say to your long-lost classmate who's just returned to school?"

She straightened her posture as if to display her attire.

She donned not an Astral Dress stained with scarlet red blood, but a jacket matching her pleated skirt——the standard issue high school uniform that Shidou and everybody else were wearing.

"You……"

He creased his brows, venting a garbled voice.

No doubt, Kurumi had been a member of that class a few months earlier. The method notwithstanding, she seemed to have gone through the official procedures and entered the class, treating the abeyance as a sabbatical leave.

Yet, even so, Shidou was not going to accept it obediently. In the end, her entry indicated that cross hairs had already been carved onto his back.

"Ara, ara."

Perhaps all the warning flags in his vision were raised at once. Kurumi stood up on a facetious whim and made a pre-emptive stride towards him.

"Shidou!"

"————"

Alerted by her sudden advance, two shadows leapt out from behind Shidou like sentinels on the lookout.

Unconfined hair the color of the night alongside a short pale shoulder-level trim, they were the Spirits who attended the same school as Shidou——Yatogami Tohka and Tobi chi Origami.

Nonetheless, both of them were but dancing within the palm of Kurumi's hand. She exhibited not an ounce of discomposure on her faux smirk as she traced her

lips with it.

"Ufufu, popular as always, Shidou-san."

An uncanny remark came off Kurumi, her looming gaze sizing Tohka and Origami up.

"Fret not. I, too, harbor no intention to cause any trouble."

"What are you trying to do……!"

"Why should we believe you?"

"My, my, aren't I unwelcome. How heart-rending indeed."

"Mgh……"

Kurumi veneered herself in a farce for sympathy. Tohka, at sixes and sevens, copied Origami's grim poker-face without another blink.

Amid her charade, Kurumi let out a few snickers.

"……If I had so foolhardily wished to employ a more, violent, method, my Angel would have turned up at present."

"Guh——"

All but silence remained in Shidou as she pilfered his speech. Kurumi's simper beamed from ear to ear, the girl resuming with the eloquence of a chorus.

"Blanketing the premises with the <City of Devouring Time>, my clones utilizing the unconscious students as human shields…… each and every one of your classmates' heads held at gunpoint, how would Shidou-san opt to tackle me? I look forward to that."

"Kurumi……!"

"Kihihi, hihi."

A spine-chilling, sinister cackle comprised Kurumi's response to having her name called out by Shidou.

"I implore you to be so kind as to take my word that I won't do such. If you still

prove unable to trust me——then I shall be more than willing to abide by your preference."

"……ch, you——"

Pitted against clear-cut intimidation performed so seductively, Shidou had his breath taken away.

Tohka and Origami heightened their guards as well , clenching their fists in resentment, only to be called off with a touch of Shidou's hands on their shoulders.

"……Alright."

"Ufufu, what a kind person you are, Shidou-san."

It seemed to be a correct answer from him, as Kurumi looked filled with delight and fixed her hair.

Shidou could do naught except avert his eyes at the enchanting sight, yet he stayed vigilant about the femme fatale.

If she were not to have tempered with his rationale, then why had she gone back to school?

Shidou had no clue.

"Kurumi, why did you……"

"Ufufu, have the goodness to refrain from making such a frightening face——I've but come to find pleasure in school life together with Shidou-san."

"……"

Shidou was speechless.

Like delivering a pasquinade, Kurumi shrugged her shoulders and continued despite his solemn silence——and in a volume audible to the entire class.

"You're too cruel~! I humbly wished no more than to go to school with Shidou-san ——even after I obeyed everything you ordered me to do!? I've been nigh on disrobed at Shidou-san's house, ready without hesitation to serve at your call! Can't I have just this meager reward for all I've done?"

"Huh!?"

The ravings of the seductress elicited an emphatic shout from the boy.

"W-What are you talking about! Those things never——"

Shidou made haste to emend.

Though that haste had gone to waste by then. His classmates, having given ear to Kurumi's promulgation, were now imposing awkward stares and whispering in hushed tones.

"Eh…… is that true? Has Itsuka-kun struck again?"

"By the way, isn't she the Tokisaki-san who transferred here in June?"

"Seems that she was supposed to be on leave…… Could it be that she'd been at Itsuka's house all along……!?"

And so, the dice of groundless rumors had been cast all at once.

"……Oou……"

Shidou's face was stained with the most desperate of desperations as he placed a hand on his forehead. On the contrary, merry giggles escaped Kurumi's mouth, perhaps resulting from his quandary.

However, his current plight entailed otherwise, not to mention that his reputation had been, and still was, shabby to begin with. In order to raise his mood, Shidou scratched his hair and heaved a sigh too deep, setting his sights back on Kurumi afterwards.

"……Just to enjoy school life, eh. If only that's your true motive, then I'll gladly welcome you.

Heck, we'll even throw a welcome party for you if that's the case. ——Of course, only if you let me seal your reiryoku."

Shidou spoke with winces between his words.

Needless to say, he had not meant those statements as they were. No, to be precise, they did stem from his heart. Never in his wildest dreams could he have predicted what followed next.

Kurumi's answer eclipsed his anticipations.

"Sure, sure. I wouldn't mind."

"……Eh?"

He was dumbfounded at her response.

Shidou meditated on the subtle tenor of her pronouncements. When he suspected his own ears and brain of abnormalities in communication, he darted a glance at Tohka's and Origami's expressions, only to discover a reflection of his own.

"Kurumi……? What did you just say——"

"To reiterate, I have no qualms about relinquishing my reiryoku to Shidou-san. That being said……"

Kurumi erected her index finger, a devilish grin delineating her mouth.

"I've but a single stipulation."

"……"

His breaths became laden.

For that Kurumi to so forthrightly hand over her powers, it was far from rocket science to imagine what sort of unfulfillable condition she was going to propound. Presuming that she was pulling his leg would have fared better.

Yet Shidou opted not to. If there existed even the most microscopic possibility of sealing Kurumi's reiryoku, Shidou had no choice besides venturing that impossible risk——More importantly, her playful gaze was no more as an unprecedented demeanor now took its place.

He resolved himself to probe.

"……This condition, what is it?"

"It's——"

Then.

The moment Kurumi's lips fluttered, the bell signaling the start of the lesson rang.

"Ara, ara. Look at the time. Be it a pity, nothing can be done."

With a twist and turn, she moved to head towards her seat.

"Kurumi!"

Shidou raised his voice to derail her, not expecting its more-than-audible volume to attract the attention of a few classmates like a magnet.

Be that as it may, Kurumi remained composed, unsurprised at the flat-fallen attempt. She tittered, placing a drawn finger on her mouth.

"The details shall follow after school. A bit of a crowd has gathered here. Not to mention—— a student's duty is to study, correct?"

Leaving behind that particular phrase, Kurumi gradually disappeared from Shidou's side.

◇◇◇

"……Tobi chi Origami, former member of the AST, ranked Master Sergeant at the time, Wizard level B+; resigned due to personal circumstances a few months ago."

Within the walls of a room inside DEM Industries' Japan Branch, Artemisia Ashcroft read aloud a document pixelated on the screen, her hand fumbling with her chin.

The strands of her glimmering golden hair seemed to absorb every trace of burnished sunlight, complementing her ultramarine pupils in an effigy of the summer ocean. By and large shaping a demure smile, her face was currently marred with sporadic hints of daze and skepticism.

"——There's no doubt about it. That's definitely her."

Artemisia plied the control panel for further details regarding the dossier.

Height, body weight, and Realizer unit training level to name a few, were among the scores of assorted data which lit up the monitor.

What she now accessed and connected to was the DEM-owned state database

available to Wizards in each and every associated country.

The Wizards of today were individuals of not incantations or rituals, but plain utilization of Realizers, allowing them to spread out their Territories.

In consequence, there was a need to surgically insert a tiny electronic chip into their brains ——to carry that out in discreteness and discretion was in the first place unfeasible.

That is to say, all information concerning Wizards who used the Realizers manufactured by DEM was inevitably recorded inside.

About a month ago, when Artemisia had attempted to launch an assault against the Spirits convened in outer space, another Wizard arrived on stage. After she conducted an enquiry as a provision against all contingencies, the visual display unit revealed any intelligence queried from the database relevant to that girl.

"Hm……"

Artemisia nevertheless pouted, somewhat fed up.

Conforming to her expectations, the fact that the archive contained such knowledge was more than tolerable, notwithstanding that only rudimentary particulars were chronicled—— none which she sought.

"——What are you doing, Artemisia?"

Someone propped themselves against the back of her chair then. A voice resounded from behind her.

With a glimpse, unbeknown to Artemisia, there stood a lady. She bore hair of a colour paler than that of the young blonde's and eyes of one darker than hers. If Artemisia were the sun, then she was a lady with illusory features like that of the moon.

Regardless, the exterior spoke not of the heart, for Artemisia lacked the arrogance to name herself after the sun in front of her.

Ellen Mira Mathers, DEM Industries' second in command, renowned by all and sundry as humanity's strongest Wizard.

"Ah, Ellen. I've a matter to look into."

Responded to with such ambiguity, Ellen leant forwards to some degree, scanning what lay next to Artemisia's hand.

"Tobi chi Origami's data, eh…… What's up with her?"

"You're acquainted?"

"Un, quite."

Ellen straitened her eyes a little. This was no reaction to write volumes about, but for some reason, she seemed to cling onto vestiges of abhorrence.

"Anything wrong? Between you and that girl."

"No, not in particular."

Ellen averted her gaze——ironclad evidence of her disinclination to expatiate on any further.

Artemisia capitulated and returned to their initial topic.

"This girl…… She's a Spirit, right?"

"That is correct. Codename <Angel>. The Spirit this world once termed <Devil>."

"Was she previously one of the AST?"

"Yes, apparently abdicating her post on account of becoming a Spirit."

"Hmph……"

Fingers still grasping her chin, Artemisia examined a photograph of Origami which turned up on the screen anew, murmuring a few seconds later.

"About that, Ellen. She and I have met in days gone by, I suppose?"

"……What are you driving at?"

"This girl appears to recognise me."

"……"

Her words annihilated any of Ellen's, though after a short time; alongside airy breaths, she regained her savoir faire.

"Artemisia, you're belittling yourself to too great an extent. There isn't a thing over the top about a former AST member knowing the SSS-ranked Artemisia Ashcroft."

"Un…… perhaps you're right."

"I am. Frankly, I haven't the faintest how you believed I'd know something you don't yourself."

"Ahaha…… I guess so."

Watching Artemisia shrug her shoulders and form a wry grin, Ellen could not help but sigh.

"Either way, Ike's calling for us. Let's go."

"Ah, all right. In a minute."

Having sent the computer into sleep mode, she followed Ellen's retreating figure out of the room.

"……."

As they made their way through the corridor wordlessly, Ellen shot a peek at Artemisia from nowhere. Naturally, being the sentient girl she was, it had been a mere trifle for her to perceive, and thereupon to reciprocate with a smile, discountenancing Ellen, who returned to face forward again.

When Artemisia had first touched upon the subject of Tobi chi Origami, Ellen felt rather unnerved straight from the shoulder, but it looked as though Artemisia had not indulged in reminiscence.

She had indeed clashed blade to blade with Origami in the latest battle. There was no helping it if some uncertainties had arisen during their heated dialogue.

Swordplay exchanged in the battlefield surely could not have jogged her memories. Even so, it would prove more prudent to confirm her conversation log later just in case. Thinking thus, Ellen entered the elevator together with Artemisia.

"Um, Ellen, does this meeting mean that we've new plans?"

"Who knows? Anyhow, he did say that he has something to show us."

"Something to show us?"

"Yes."

Trading trivial banters and immaterial whatnots, both of them reached the top

floor of the building——before DEM Industries' Managing Director, Isaac Westcott's chamber.

But.

"——"

Ellen came to an abrupt standstill, having detected that beyond the door lingered an unwonted presence.

Despite Westcott possessing an air of intimidation that the majority of commoners nowhere near did, the roiling presence a meagre doorstep away distilled a unique ambience.

As if——yes, as if a horde of horrors awaited them both with hushed breaths.

"Ellen."

"——Yeah."

Artemisia showed signs of realization, knitting her brows and grimacing.

"Exactly what is this?"

"I haven't an idea."

"Sir Isaac couldn't have been…… attacked, could he?"

"Certainly not, even if this place is just a branch office, it's still within DEM Industries all the same. Come what may, to launch an assault under our very noses, no person could——"

Ellen gasped part way.

——There was one; one who had once raided the Japan branch company.

The Spirit <Nightmare>——Capable of manipulating time and shadows, along with an infinite stockpile of clones amassed from precursory timelines.

Of course, they hardly lowered their guards. When it came to a possible assailant, however, no one except her came to mind. Ellen gritted her teeth and threw the door wide open, knocking being the least of her concerns.

"Ike! You all right!? Ik——"

But as she stomped into the room, her brisk tread and voice died out just as quick.

It was self-explanatory. No Spirit could be found in the suite, and Westcott sat comfortably on his armchair.

"This is……"

"——Ah, I see you've arrived, Ellen. What's the matter? You look like you've seen an apparition."

"No, it's nothing."

She spruced up the disheveled lapels of her suit not a moment later, whereafter Artemisia expelled a staggered expression in similar fashion.

"Eh……? I'm definite I sensed something in here……"

Tongue-in-cheek, Westcott delighted in feasting his eyes on the two's reactions, then rose to his feet and ambled towards the window.

"Well. I've summoned the both of you today for no other reason——Further to the Spirit from outer space falling into Ratatoskr's clutches, they've now totted up ten."

"……I apologize for those disgraces of mine."

Ellen hung her head in shame at his words.

During the collision in the cosmos, the <Goetia> led by her had been brought to its knees by the spaceship <Fraxinus>. This memory vividly abided in Ellen. If she had not been shot down there, the tide of the battle would have, for the most part, stayed unaltered.

Westcott boasted a paucity of objurgating her, though.

"There's no need to stir up a fuss over those affairs. The two of you have done ever so well.

In fact, I dare say our present circumstances shall precipitate the best-case scenario."

"The best?"

"Indubitably. An ample tally of Spirits have flocked together, and I've a,

nevertheless partial, Demon King in my hands. ——Elliot's absence is a pity if anything."

"……Tch."

Elliot. At the sound of that traitor's name, Ellen's face distorted into one of grimness without thinking.

Most likely having discerned her gravity, Westcott unwound his shoulders.

"In any case, the time's quite fit. Still bearing in mind what I mentioned earlier, Ellen? —— We'll have that Itsuka Shidou play the part of the key for us."

"……! That's——"

Her pupils dilated.

Westcott chortled, his right hand hoisted aloft.

A varnish of jet-black murk began to gush forth, and a tome of tenebrous bindings materialized——The Demon King <Beelzebub>, a spectacle in the form of a book he procured from the Spirit <Sister>.

Its prowess lay in omniscience: to see everything and to know everything which had happened, happened, and would happen in this world, truly the worst of the worst of abilities.

"Let that <Sister> throw a spanner in the works of my rootling around for all I care. With adequate welly, even the tiniest chink in Ratatoskr's circumspection won't be kept under their hats any longer. ——It's about time we thoroughly proceeded with slaughter. Mercy is uncalled for. Flaunt the might of humanity's strongest Wizard to your heart's content."

"Leave it to me. I will without fail deliver you the perfect outcome."

"All right. I've high expectations for the both of you."

As though living up to his words, Ellen refined her posture in assent, Artemisia following suit a beat later.

"Then, we had best depart straight away——"

"——Oh, and one more thing."

At that moment, having cut in on her, Westcott seemed electrified by a sharp

moment of remembrance and roused the tips of his shoulders.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to tell you something with regard to this operation——I've assembled the supplementary personnel for this stratagem."

"Supplementary personnel——Wizards? Do you deem our capabilities insufficient?"

Ellen strived her utmost to enunciate in an equanimous manner; yet to no avail, for conspicuous tinctures of pique leaked from her concealments.

"I uttered no such thing. You're beyond the shadow of a doubt the most powerful Wizard, and Artemisia's endued with vigor second solely to yours. However, you mustn't underestimate strength in numbers. Sealed Spirits are child's play before you both, but place two and two together and they could delay you by a couple of minutes. And it is these few ticks that might cost you your target."

"That……"

"Ahaha, you've got us in a bind."

Artemisia tactlessly giggled while her mortified colleague crinkled her brows.

What Westcott had stated consisted but of the truth. The basis for Ellen, whose power was unrivaled, to fall through in capturing her objective on many occasions was without doubt the Spirits' trammels.

Even with DEM's Wizards and unmanned Bandersnatches, in view of the monumental disparity between the strength of the contemporary Spirits and theirs, the trepidation of additional troops was critical.

"But, Ike, I'm not acquainted with any Wizards competent to keep pace with us. To have us muck in with a half-baked team would influence our performance quite the reverse."

"Aah, of course it would."

He ratified her expounding with good grace.

"Still , I urge you to take it easy. They shall be of great use to you, I believe."

Raising his hand in his own good time, Westcott snapped his fingers.

In the twinkling of an eye, innumerable sheets of paper proliferated from the back of his chair like a frenetic gale, eddying in mid-air.

"Wha——"

"Waa!"

The rapid unforeseen turn of events paralyzed both ladies, after which the pieces of paper mantled the walls all the way to the hilt.

At that point, the two at long last ascertained the layers of paper to be the pages of an antiquated book.

"This……"

Ellen tapered her vision in a bid to zoom in on them——just to immediately broaden her eyelids in disbelief.

It was no wonder. Droves of girls crawled out of the pages.

Heads of grey hair gravitating towards a coal-black color beheld them both with verdigris pupils abounding in intrigue.

Yet the most idiosyncratic trait was——every single one of them retained the exact identical face, as though cut from the same cloth.

"……! Ellen."

"Yeah……"

Drops of sweat oozed down from Artemisia's cheek.

That's right; those were the myriads of presences they felt prior to setting foot in the room.

"Introductions are in order. The Daughters of the Demon King——<Nibelcol>."

His eyes tinted with cuprous rust, Westcott declared with a devious smirk.

Opalescent saffron rays of the evening sun beamed through the classroom

windows.

Shidou took a brief glance at the digital clock etched on the face of his mobile phone, puffing out a breath and lifting his head.

It was after school, wherein all classes had drawn to a close. His classmates too had by then set sail for home, leaving behind no more than the profiles of Shidou, Tohka, and Origami, as well as the Yamai sisters, Kaguya and Yuzuru from the neighboring class. They comprised Spirits whose powers Shidou had sealed in the past.

Obviously, but one reason was keeping him there.

——To once again converse with Kurumi.

Her appointed tête-à-tête location was the rooftop of the school building. Shidou rounded his fists to gird up his loins and sprung up from his chair.

"——So, I should pretty much get going, everyone."

Upset, Tohka creased her eyebrows into an upended letter V-shape.

"Muu…… Will you be okay, Shidou? Maybe we should tag along after all……"

The other Spirits nodded, each intimating their own respective accords.

"Like Tohka said, it's too dangerous."

"To do battle with she who enwreathes the Stygian, imperative are our forces."

"Consent. We will accompany you."

Shidou managed to muster a grin and patted Tohka on the head, swinging his own side to side.

"Thanks, all of you. But I'll be fine. Sure, Kurumi's one dangerous Spirit…… but she isn't the kind to go back on her word. And besides——"

He clenched onto thin air with firm hands.

"If the guy who's going to seal her powers can't even talk to her one-to-one, won't the future look awfully bleak?"

"Shidou……"

Tohka persisted in her distraught face, but then while stubbornly headstrong, she shook her head again post-haste and revivified her expression with zesty cheer.

"……Umu, I get it. Good luck!"

"Aah."

Bowing with verve, Shidou withdrew from the classroom, and from everyone else. He ascended towards the top floor, coming up before the doorway leading to the open-air roof.

Just then, a well-known voice was relayed from a compact earpiece stuck in his right ear.

『You ought to be aware already, but don't try anything reckless. Even if it'll be under <Fraxinus>' surveillance, Kurumi's Angel's a bit peculiar. We won't know what's going to happen at all.』

The speaker was none other than his little sister, the commander of Ratatoskr, Itsuka Kotori.

She was currently situated within the airship <Fraxinus>, observing Shidou's and the others'

state of affairs with extreme heed.

"Yeah, I understand. Even so, saving Spirits is Ratatoskr's goal, right? No matter how scary Kurumi may be, running without a single word would get my ass kicked by my scarier Imouto-sama."

『Ara, I would tie you up and serve you a large helping of tickle torture, not to mention publicize to the whole world everything about your dark past I've gathered until now. Kick your ass? What a kind-hearted Imouto-sama. Make sure to take care.』

"……Haha."

Kotori returned his quip with a humph. Face dribbling with perspiration, Shidou made an effort to smile.

The accretion of tenseness that had been swathing him lightened up a shade as he slapped his cheeks to irrupt into the right frame of mind. Shidou unbarred the door.

"＿＿"

A brilliant radiance incomparable to the luminous intensity of the hallway set his field of vision ablaze, impelling him to attenuate his eyes——Bit by bit, his line of sight clustered upon the outline of the sole girl in the center.

"——Ara."

Kurumi, vacantly gazing at the town in the distance beyond the fence, appeared to have noticed his advent and twirled a full semicircle around.

"Ufufu, welcome. You've my gratitude for presenting yourself, Shidou-san."

She tramped nearer to him with a handful of extensive strides, afterwards raising the hem of her skirt to give a theatrical curtsy.

This unduly poised, graceful gesticulation mesmerized and ensnared Shidou's sight in a wink.

Contrarily, now was not the time to occupy himself with such concerns. He swung his head left and right as if to liberate his mind from the imminent allure. Then, he locked his stare onto Kurumi's face.

"Alright, Kurumi. I'm here as we promised."

"……"

At first glance, she requited his eye, but to curve the corners of her mouth.

"As I thought this morn——albeit minuscule, you've certainly changed, Shidou-san."

"Eh……?"

"Contrasted with our very first encounter, your countenance has matured. Well, after having spent your days in such a mare's nest, that is to be expected. Ufufu…… How lovely you've become."

"D-Don't make fun of me."

A hint of cold feet dogged his remark. The fact that it was nightfall made Shidou all the more appreciative. But for the sunset enveloping his entire physique, the image of his redden cheeks would have been impractical to veil.

"Rather, it's time you fessed up. About this morning——the condition in order to seal your power."

Kurumi's lips curled once more at his utterances.

A simper too irresistible——one too bewitchingly eerie.

With her back shouldering the dusk sun, to say that she smacked of the Fourth Horseman ushering Shidou into the netherworld was not in the slightest hyperbolic.

"Oh, very well then. I'll speak. I——"

——In that instant.

When the half-light smeared Kurumi began to talk.

"……gh!?"

Out of the blue, Shidou was afflicted with an acute dizziness.

No. If one had an aversion to faulty expressions, the word dizziness would fail to hit home the sensation. This feeling resembled having one's source of power cleaved without warning; a sense of loss outclassing agony and malady at once, threatening to bury his body in darkness in a split second of vulnerability.

However, he had felt this impalpable formication before.

When his flesh and bones were punctured by a bullet.

When his guts were impaled by a sword from behind.

And——When a part of his body was obliterated to naught by a key.

It existed as a fleeting feeling of one's own body being overrun by something which effortlessly transcended a human lifeform's mortal potentialities.

In the fullness of time, this was the tingle of death—— ◇

At 17:30, around the airspace of Tenguu City, Tokyo Prefecture.

Sheathed in the platinum CR-Unit <Pendragon>, Ellen levitated by means of her Territory encapsulating herself and her vicinity while peering down at a marked high school from afar.

The concrete in-between distance well exceeded ten thousand meters, yet the Wizard had a crystal-clear bird's eye view of the small figures fidgeting there.

The Spirit by the name of <Nightmare>, alongside Itsuka Shidou.

"Are the preparations complete?"

Ellen surveyed the conditions below, muttering to herself.

The communication device then transmitted Artemisia's voice.

『Of course. Ready whenever you are.』

Equipped in <Pendragon>'s sister model, <Lancelot>, Artemisia was positioned at another location, studying the same targets as that of Ellen.

Ellen's soundless silence acted as an interim substitute for her response, after which she again looked down and brandished with all speed the unit equipped on her back.

The retracted framework unfurled, rejigging into a luminously brilliant golden saber.

Made within the realms of possibility via the superabundant magic output of Realizer technology, the laser blade <Caledfwlch>, named after a holy sword, was <Pendragon>'s chief weapon.

"——Here we go."

A laconic exhortation from her was all it took for them to start their accelerated descent, as though propelling themselves off a wall of thin air.

Such velocity rivalled a lead bullet's trajectory; more than enough for an ordinary person to black out or even get ripped to shreds——and they gave the impression of traversing at such a speed being a cakewalk as the two centered on their goal.

A stale metaphor like 'untraceable with the naked eye' now encroached on reality. No soul could perceive Ellen, so to speak.

——However.

"……ch! Hah!"

Ellen, splintering through the molecules of air like a comet hurtling across outer space, experienced an instantaneous stop and armed her sword.

A vivid burst of magical energy dispersed in every bearing, illuminating the masses of clouds around.

"Kuh——"

Even the powerhouse <Caledfwlch> could not yield a blast of such immensity with a single strike.

That's right; there prevailed yet another magic-endowed blade.

"——Phew. To pull up in that timing; it sure is you, Ellen."

The girl who raised her sword against Ellen did so for the tips of her mouth as well.

She was clad in a CR-Unit formulated after a wolf, her hair bundled into a ponytail, a pronounced mole under her left eye.

"You're——"

Having given ear to that voice, having caught sight of that face, Ellen found it difficult not to furrow her brows.

"Mana! Why are you here!?"

"Hah!"

Ellen calling out her name was a blunder; the girl——Takamiya Mana seized the opportunity to launch a riving follow-up.

"Chi——"

Ire contorted Ellen's mien while she maneuvered her Territory and position, staving off the attack.

Their separation lengthened with a backward leap, she glared daggers at Mana, who shrugged her shoulders like a tease.

"Oya oya, that's a nerve-racking look you've got there. With wrinkles comes old age, you know."

"……Rubbish."

As if spitting the vocable out, Ellen observed Mana with caution, pondering ad nauseam.

Mana had grasped her flight trajectory, which in and of itself was admissible. Despite not being at Ellen's tier, she still proved to be an extraordinarily

competent Wizard. Flanking a committed hunter would always turn out easier than challenging them head-on.

However, that would imply she knew Ellen's whereabouts and objective beforehand.

——Did Mana know Ellen would attack Shidou?

No, granted that information was somehow leaked, pinpointing where and when she had started the assault alone would have been problematic.

——Then, had Shidou realized the likelihood of being ambushed and remained on his toes up till now?

No, supposing that he was astute, to keep a weather eye on a ten-thousand-meter radius area around the clock was a feat not accomplishable by even the most excellent Wizards.

"……Hm."

Having invalidated the few hypotheses floating into her mind, Ellen neatened her hair leisurely.

What mattered the greatest now was on no account exploring how Mana had managed to stumble upon Ellen's location. She conveyed a mental directive to Artemisia, who was situated on the other side.

"Artemisia. We've got company. Change of plans. For now——"

Midway, Ellen discerned it.

In lieu of Artemisia's voice being broadcast back to her, only a scramble of random noise could be apprehended.

"This is……"

For Artemisia to be defeated was hard to believe. A jammed transmission, she feared, or Artemisia had been besieged like herself and was engaged in a fight.

Ellen clicked her tongue, glowering all the more ferociously at Mana.

"I haven't the foggiest notion of how you contrived it, but brilliant work."

Afterwards, from nowhere, even Mana's face contorted into a frown.

"……You don't say. Too brilliant it pisses me off. Ellen, if only you hadn't shown up, I could've brushed it aside as a joke."

"……? What was that?"

Her confounding statement left a crease or two in Ellen's eyebrows. Lacking the intent to elaborate any further, Mana joggled her head from side to side.

"This has nothing to do with you. ——Instead, what are we to do now? You've missed the most suitable timing anyhow."

"Hmph."

Mana's goading elicited a scornful scoff from Ellen, who aimed the sharp end of her saber at her.

"You managed to halt my attack, I'll give you that. But all you did was give meaning to the words 'you won against me' for the first time."

"Hnn? Come at me then——"

She adopted a combat stance and readied her own laser blade.

On the other hand, Ellen wasted not another second on listening.

"——is what I expected you to say."

With that riposte, she unlatched her backpack unit, letting what had lain encased inside roam free in her Territory.

——The manifold book pages within.

"……Paper?"

Mana uttered in perplexity, lowering her posture to some degree.

Perhaps she was unable to tell the purport of Ellen's actions, thus breaking into an offensive.

Ellen relaxed her lips with a sigh, thereafter extending her left hand forwards as opposed to her right which clasped onto her sword. Alongside that motion, the unnumbered sheets of paper arranged themselves in rank and file, spick and span.

Mana stood no chance, as it were, to overpower Ellen. Nonetheless, the way

Westcott had noted, she could well buy time.

Hence, Ellen ought not to succumb to Mana's taunts, but to carry out her mission not a moment later.

"……What are you conniving at?"

Scrutinizing Ellen's oddly suspicious behavior, Mana muttered to herself.

Nonetheless, her doubt was not addressed specifically to Ellen. Even if it did get through, nobody of sound mind would outright reveal their own hand to the enemy.

"——Come forth, <Nibelcol>."

Ellen commanded with a snap of her fingers.

The folios of paper encircling her then began to palpitate and pulsate, with many girls creeping out from within.

Enrobed in black garments, the girls all bore identical facial expressions.

"Aah——"

"What…… Is it time already?"

"No matter. It is for Otou-sama's sake, after all."

Looking the epitome of listlessness, each of them stretched their bodies while contemplating Mana.

"……!"

Her breath froze.

For a moment there, she had surmised herself hallucinating or even delirious. It would have been facile for Ellen to project any illusion she had devised in her Territory.

But that was far from the case.

A visual inspection of the space provided an estimate of twenty people.

Every single one of them emanated a very much tangible presence, not to mention a dense heap of energy.

Yes——It paralleled the time she came face to face with <Nightmare>'s, Tokisaki Kurumi's, clones.

Ellen grinned from ear to ear at Mana's guise.

"They shall be the ones to entertain you. ——<Nibelcol>, I'll be making for the target. The rest is up to you."

She issued orders to the girls——<Nibelcol>, who cast an indifferent glance at her and waved goodbye.

"Aah, all right. Take care."

"By the way, who's Ellen to Otou-sama? A lover?"

"Ehh, no way. Otou-sama's got some bad tastes."

The girls giggled with glee.

"……Hey."

Ellen frowned upon the unanticipated feedback.

However, she abhorred wavering before Mana all the same. Freshening up with a shake of her head, Ellen faced downwards——at the high school where Shidou was.

"Ch. You're not getting away……!"

In order to put an end to Ellen, Mana planned to deploy her thrusters.

Yet just before she could, the <Nibelcol> girls that were chortling until then darted a gaze as keen as a whetted needle at her in unison.

"Kuh……"

Grimacing, she gnashed her teeth.

If this were a one-against-one skirmish, Mana's victory would be assured. But the adversaries totaled twenty, and moreover they were assigned to hinder her from hindering Ellen, not to subdue her. The circumstances were poles apart.

To obstruct a Wizard much more powerful than herself while under the obstruction of twenty people——Confronted with such an unrealistic crisis, Mana could feel the beads of sweat trickling down her cheeks.

Inadequacy stared her in the face. Without reinforcements amounting to that of <Nibelcol> —— "——Ara, ara."

At that moment.

When Mana was on the brink of surrender, a voice vexatious to everyone reverberated from behind her.

"……Nn?"

"What's with that? Exact lookalikes; Uwah, it's somehow scary."

"Ahaha, we're no different, though."

The <Nibelcol> in front of Mana were struggling to speak simultaneously.

As if in retaliation, countless silhouettes emerged behind her.

An Astral Dress of vermilion and jet black, hair bundled unevenly on both sides, and——a left eye that tick-tocked in sync with the passing time.

With facsimiles mirroring the Spirit, Tokisaki Kurumi seemed one-hundred per cent supportive of Mana and there to aid her.

"……<Nightmare>."

She turned her line of sight leftwards, her manner ever more austere; to which Kurumi gave out a smug and amused smirk.

"What a twist of fate, Mana-san. You'll allow me to lend a hand if you're at a pinch, won't you? Even I myself find it distasteful to bully the weak."

"From whose mouth spouted such nonsense, I'll chop off your head along with that cunning tongue of yours, free of charge."

"Ara, how frightening, frightening indeed. ……How~e~ver, is now truly the time to keep up your bold front? Mana-san alone would flounder to tackle all of them, I wonder."

"……Ch."

Without as much as bothering to repress hostility, Mana clacked her tongue and hauled her light saber <Wolftail> anew.

"After each and every one of them is taken care of, you're next!"

"——dou-san, Shidou-san."

"……!"

His name called out by Kurumi, Shidou cracked open his eyes.

"Eh…… Uh…… Huh……?"

He scanned his surroundings, throat in a daze.

Where he now reposed was the roof of the very Raizen High School they attended, in front of him a Kurumi bedaubed with the magnificent setting sun.

After Shidou became conscious thereof, question marks of introspection wafted into his mind.

——Why was I trying to bear out the obvious?

That's correct; everything he attempted to confirm was already known.

Shidou was harrowed with an indisposition which stole transitory moments of his cognizance, merely to redo remembrance from the beginning, as though the reset button of a game had been pressed.

"Are you alive and well , Shidou-san?"

"A-Aah…… Sorry, spaced out for a bit there——"

Still an affliction bedeviled the boy.

Her back against the eventide, Kurumi's physique gave the impression of being reoriented vaguely.

No, if truth be told, nothing should have shifted.

How was he to put it…… Her wonted profile of stiff aloofness and sangfroid appeared rather worn out and threadbare.

"Kurumi……? Did you……"

"——Ara, ara?"

A quiver absconded from the edges of her brows, albeit subtle, whereafter her habitual articulation rejoined.

"Have I something on my face?"

"……Ah, no."

In the blink of an eye, the Kurumi he was familiar with came back, obliging him to prevaricate.

By all means, a perceptible contrast manifested. But where and how, Shidou could not point out to a nicety.

"——All right then; let us get back on-topic."

Whether she saw through his thoughts or otherwise, Kurumi aggrandized her attitude and spurred on the conversation.

"My aim is as it was, letter for letter, the reiryoku contained within Shidou-san's body…… I'd like to partake of but that. The rationale behind recommencing school is exceedingly simple, too. Including Mukuro-san, whom you've only recently sealed, hasn't Shidou-san accumulated ten spirits' worth of energy thus far? Ufufu, I fancy the time is ripe."

"……"

Shidou deflected no segment of his view off her form, retorting with pure muteness, his face profusely drenched.

To partake of; in laymen's terms, to devour his reiryoku, and him with it——synonymous with his demise. Undeterred by the fact that it was at a Spirit's request, Shidou could not accede in any way.

In spite of that, Kurumi should have been au fait with this complication to a marked extent.

Placing a finger on her lips like a ravishing temptress, she mounded a spellbinding smile.

"And Shidou-san's aspiration is to seal mine…… correct?"

"……Aah. But just that won't be good enough."

"I beg your pardon?"

She slanted her head, baffled at his assertion, to which he outstretched his index finger.

"I'm going to seal your powers, have you atone for all you've done until now——and on top of that, let you live a happy life. That's my——our ultimate goal."

"Ara, ara."

Unable to stifle it any longer, Kurumi dissolved into laughter as she arched her stature.

"Ufufu, you're quite the philanthropic saint, aren't you, Shidou-san? ——Regrettably, I'm afraid I cannot agree either. Not that I've no interest in the happy life you mentioned, however, I mustn't be deprived of my reiryoku at all costs."

She proffered the finger on her mouth forwards.

"Here we are stuck in a quagmire. Shidou-san's wish and mine run parallel to each other, none of which shall be brought to fruition in the status quo, frittering away precious time……"

Kurumi then lined up the forefinger of her other hand beside the previous.

"Nee, Shidou-san."

The curvature of her lips ever so coquettish, she met the touch of her two fingers.

——Like a kiss.

"Rather than letting our parallel lines never intersect and our hopes come to naught, would you not prefer a method fulfilling both? ——Even if it may lead to us forfeiting everything."

Her head canted.

"……"

Seeming to have fathomed out the treacherous cliff her words trod on, his body was jolted with butterflies.

Not long after, that precarious tension diffused throughout the environment by and by.

For all that, the source of the suspense, Kurumi herself, started chuckling.

"Please don't be on pins and needles, Shidou-san. I believe I've said this in the past, but I haven't the slightest intent to pillage your reiryoku by force."

"……Then, what do you propose?"

A glint of uncertainty in his eyes, Shidou posed precisely the query Kurumi had

been waiting to pounce on. She fanned out her hands exaggeratedly.

"Ufufu, that will conform to Shidou-san's manner."

"Eh……?"

"Fufu."

There and then, Kurumi performed a twirling pirouette, the pitter-patter of the soles of her shoes tapping on the floor.

"——Whoever of us makes the other fall for them first…… How does that sound?"

"……Eh?"

An unforeseen proposal dumbfounded him.

"The one who makes the other fall for them…… wins?"

"Quite so, quite so."

Her voice whispered, edging nearer to Shidou.

"I shall continue in this high school for a while. In the event that I fall in love with Shidou-san, my powers will be yours for the taking. ……How~e~ver, if the converse is to occur, the win shall be mine…… On that occasion, Shidou-san will be mine to delight in."

"You…… It's clear I'll lose my life if I fall for you, so there's no way that'll happen. This match was pointless to begin with——"

"——Are you sure?"

Kurumi interrupted him, her tantalizing digit stroking his chin up.

"I, however…… possess it - the confidence to make Shidou-san waive his life for me."

"……!"

Shidou, astonished at her self-confidence, gulped down his breath.

Kurumi sneaked a peek with her upper field of vision at his expression, tittering.

"Tell me, Shidou-san, do you? The confidence to captivate me; the mettle to

coerce me to choose Shidou-san over my everything."

"I-I……"

Ba-dump, ba-dump; his heart throbbed with intensity.

Perhaps dreadfully aware that death awaited him at one wrong step, or the enchantress before him had plucked his heart, Shidou was currently incapable of differentiating.

At that moment, similar to a wake-up call from heaven, Kotori's voice echoed from the receiver in his right ear.

『Get a hold of yourself, Shidou. For that Kurumi to put forward such a strange requirement, she's definitely plotting something behind our backs. Reine, start the analysis, quick——』

But, in that instant, an alarm piercing through her vocalization came blaring out from his earpiece.

『What the hell 's going on at a time like this!』

『Commander, this response!』

『Wha…… That's……!?』

Following Kotori's voice brimming with dismay and buzzes of warbled static noise, neither intelligible nor random sound resonated from the receiver anymore.

"……!!"

Budging it had little effect.

Completely isolated from contact with <Fraxinus>, it was the equivalent to losing sight of the lighthouse while out at sea during the night.

Yet in defiance of the utterly forlorn circumstances, the incomprehension swelling within Shidou quashed any wisp of anxiety or trepidation.

——Noble obligation, along with a sense of duty.

Shidou was now gifted with the chance to persuade Tokisaki Kurumi.

The Shidou of the past would have already cowered in fear by then.

The former Shidou would have been in complete disarray, baffled with what to say.

But the person who now stood there was no longer any of his former selves.

He was a man who had charmed, as well as sealed, ten Spirits.

Tohka, Yoshino, Kotori, Kaguya, Yuzuru, Miku, Natsumi, Origami, Nia, and Mukuro; they all stood by his side, encouraging him without hesitation.

He could never look at them in the eye again if he were to shy away from Kurumi now.

"——I know."

Shidou thrust his finger towards her, a broad smile surfacing on his mouth.

"I accept your contest. I'll make you choose me and give your everything up."

Being replied to with such ardency, Kurumi augmented her beam of mirth.

"Ufufu, fufu. That's Shidou-san for you; the very person I've acknowledged indeed."

Spinning her body around——Kurumi issued a manifesto of war with impish banter.

"Now then——let us begin our date, shall we?"

Chapter 2 - Tide of Battle

“——Kuu!”

It was night when a loud bang threw open the entranceway. Shidou thought Kotori had returned, but at that moment, she delivered a vigorous punch straight at the pit of his stomach.

“Ouch!”

Kotori’s sudden attack taking him by surprise, Shidou’s entire body inadvertently flew backwards into the living room.

“W-What are you doing, Kotori……!”

“This is no time to ask ‘what are you doing’! Don’t you understand? If you lose, you’ll die!!”

“……I know, but in that situation——”

Kotori made a ‘hun’ sound with her nose and scratched her head in irritated frustration before speaking.

“Aah, really. I already know you had no choice but to accept Kurumi’s proposal. But understanding and accepting are two different things! As usual, this idiot brother of mine never looks out for himself……!”

“Y-You…….”

Then, as Shidou was struggling to get up, cold sweat submerging his face, Kotori pointed her finger towards him.

“Un.”

“……’Un’? What the heck do you mean?”

“I’ll let you return the punch…… It was the support role’s fault to have communication ceased when you were forced to make a critical decision.”

“Hey, hey……”

Shidou formed a troubled face. Occasionally, Kotori would put on such a masculine facade.

Although this was one of Kotori’s strong points, no matter what, it was impossible to truly shatter the past. Thus it was expected for the honorable older brother to dote on the little sister.

However, if done half-heartedly against one’s wishes, it wouldn’t be viewed as deception and he would feel very apologetic towards Kotori’s feelings.

Shidou inhaled a deep breath as he got up to stand in front of Kotori.

“……It can’t be helped. You’re really considerate, Kotori.”

“Ah, bring it on.”

Kotori stretched both of her hands to the side in order to emphasize her defenselessness.

Shidou took in another gulp of air——

“Here!”

Shidou quickly placed both of his hands in Kotori’s armpits, moving his fingers at full tilt to cause a kochokochokocho sound.

“What!? W-Wait a minute…… Ahahahahaha!?”

Kotori’s body writhed until she could no longer stand from the laughter. After such relentless tickling, Kotori collapsed head first onto the sofa. Shidou clapped his hands together in a ‘pat-pat’.

“Hah. Well, this much should be enough.”

“U-Unfair…… That was too much……”

As Shidou concluded his kitsch prank, Kotori let out a weak voice punctuated with pants, being out of breath from laughing too hard.

At that time.

“——Shidou, we’ve come to bother you!”

Just at that timing, the door was pushed open and the girls entered the living room one by one.

Tohka and Origami, who had gone back to the Spirit Mansion next door and her own house respectively to change clothes, came back with Yoshino, Natsumi, Mukuro, alongside Nia and Miku, who had their own houses in the city. Even <Ratatoskr>'s analytic officer, Murasame Reine, was among the crowd lined up inside the room. Perhaps, Kotori had invited everyone over to discuss today's events.

"Un……?"

Right then, as a consequence of seeing Shidou's and Kotori's posture in the living room reflected upon their sight, everyone without exception became startled with dumbstruck expressions within their eyes.

"Wa…… Why is Kotori lying on the sofa teary-eyed and with her body twitching!?"

"……Eh, what is this? What happened?"

"Ah, no, this is because……"

Turning over to that direction, Shidou tried to explain the circumstances at a breathtaking momentum as a few of the Spirits began to let their imaginations run wild.

However, Kotori was a step faster than him. She brushed it aside when he tried to stand up before suddenly throwing herself into Yuzuru's embrace. Incidentally, the person closest to her was not Yuzuru but rather Miku, who had sneaked there through splendid steps.

"Fuah! Everyone, listen to me…… Shidou, he, Shidou, he…… ha!"

While pretending to cry, Kotori buried her face in Yuzuru's chest. Seeing Kotori in this uncharacteristic reaction, the Spirits stared at Shidou with stunned aspects.

"S-Shidou!? What did you do to Kotori!"

"There, there, Kotori, everything is fine now."

"Aiyaa, sorry, Boy. Did we get in the way of this wonderful thing of yours?"

"Ei——"

As the Spirits all gave a wide variety of reactions, Shidou could not help but raise

the tone of his voice.

“W-Wait a minute, you’re all wrong! This isn’t……!”

“Doubt. Wrong? What is?”

“What Kotori said of course——”

All of a sudden, Shidou’s body started trembling. Kotori had only said, ‘Shidou, he.’ What was spoken did not technically constitute as a lie.

In that instant, while Kotori was tightly clinging onto Yuzuru, her lips flashed a slightly evil smirk in Shidou’s direction.

“Y-You’re scheming against me, Kotori!”

“What are you talking about?! Don’t shift your responsibilities onto Kotori!”

“A-Are you okay, Kotori-san……”

“Ahn! Always Kotori! Unfair!.”

“Is she still your little sister? Are little sisters better? It must be fortunate to have prepared the adoption documents beforehand, Oni -chan.”

“Don’t you think your reaction’s getting more and more ridiculous!?”

Such words filled with blame, envy, and demand fired at him from everyone’s mouth, Shidou yelled a scream thick with lament.

——About ten minutes after the turmoil subsided.

In the end, Kotori, who failed to eschew laughing soon afterwards, explained the situation to everyone.

……Incidentally, during the ensuing chaos with everybody crowded together, some of the clothing worn on Shidou’s person had gone missing somehow, the culprit ultimately getting away with it. To be exact, there had been three suspects, only escaping conviction on account of insufficient evidence.

Later, it was discovered that all the suspects at the time had been colluding together; leading to this affair being termed the 1-2-9 incident…… but that was another story.

“……So that’s the matter at hand.”

After clarifying, Kotori looked on to the Spirits in the living room in the direction of a full circle.

Yoshino and Natsumi nervously gulped.

Though it was impossible to avoid, Kotori had explained not only her quarrel with Shidou, but also the appearance of the Worst Spirit, Kurumi, at school——and how Kurumi had purposed a match to Shidou.

Of course, Tohka, Origami, and the Yamai sisters, who had been there at school, as well as Reine, who had been onboard <Fraxinus>, already knew about the detailed circumstances.

However, the Spirits that did not attend Raizen High School fell short of that opportunity.

They were likely thinking about the future as the circumstances were conveyed to them too.

“Please also be cautious, everyone. Since Kurumi’s goal is the Spirits’ reiryoku, the possibility of her appearing before you isn’t zero.”

“Y-Yes……”

“……I understand. I won’t leave the house.”

Seeing Natsumi clinging onto to her knees in fright, Kotori gave out a wry smile.

“No, I didn’t get to finish speaking…… <Ratatoskr> will also strengthen its alertness.”

Then, the girl sitting beside her——Mukuro spoke up in almost a whisper.

“Fumu…… Muku fathoms naught.”

She tilted her head to a degree in a cute gesture. In accordance to that act, her long blonde hair stroked the surface of the sofa. Once, during the past few days, Shidou had cut the tips of her hair, but that dazzling mane still boasted as the longest among the Spirits.

“Un? What is it?”

“The reiryoku of the Spirits to seek…… ‘Tis fair. Rightly so, then for what avail needs Kurumi said reiryoku? Wherefore covets she through toilsome means to acquire it?”

“That……”

As Mukuro asked those questions, Shidou found it difficult to provide a coherent answer.

Indeed, it was just as Mukuro had pronounced. Over half a year had passed since Kurumi first appeared before Shidou. Sometimes as an enemy and other times as an ally who would lend him her power, she had never disclosed what she planned to do with that reiryoku nonetheless.

“Fuh, it’s not impossible for me to personally understand. Beyond life as a Spirit, it is not unnatural to seek being the strongest!”

Kaguya spoke while striking an exaggeratedly stylish pose. Sitting beside her, Yuzuru breathed out a sigh.

“Sigh. It would be simple to deal with if Kurumi is as simple as Kaguya.”

“D-Don’t make me sound like an idiot!”

“Denial. I did not say that. In this world, a simple person is the strongest. Being simple is the best. In other words, Kaguya is the strongest.”

“Eh, really!? K-Kukuku……! That is to say, Yuzuru, even you understand that!”

Kaguya once again struck an elated pose. Yuzuru turned towards Shidou, shooting out glance that seemed to say, ‘I wonder.’ Not knowing how to respond to that, Shidou could only move forward with a botched ambiguous smile.

At that moment, Shidou noticed, while floating between the previous conversation, that Nia’s normal cheerful demeanor had been replaced by serious expression immersed in thought.

“……? What’s wrong, Nia? Is your stomach upset from eating something bad?”

“Yes, yes, early this morning I picked up some candy lying on the side of the road…… about this big!”

With a flashy snap of her wrist, Nia perfectly inserted herself into the role of a tsukkomi.

Seeing this, Shidou exhaled a sigh of relief.

“Good, it’s the usual Nia.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Boy?”

With half-opened eyes, Nia asked back. In response, Shidou lowered his head, as if saying, ‘No, don’t pay attention to that.’

“Well, forget about it. Compared to that, I have a little bit of info pertaining to Kurumin’s goal.”

“……! What……!”

As Kotori made a startled expression after hearing Nia’s words, Nia could only helplessly shrug her shoulders in return.

“It can’t be helped that you are surprised. Sorry, sorry, I didn’t intend to hide it, but……”

“Nia, you are actually calling Kurumi, ‘Kurumin’……!?”

“Hey, focus on what was said first!”

As Nia put on a tsukkomi role once again, Shidou found himself reflexively applauding with his hands.

“Aaah, really, even Imouto-chan is like this! When all’s said and done, this is the image the Itsuka siblings have of me!”

As Nia pouted her lips in dissatisfaction, Shidou made a wry smile as he exchanged glances with Kotori.

“After all……”

“Exactly……”

“Really!”

Just like in a manga, the angry Nia raised her hand in protest. Kotori spoke out in order to calm her down.

My apologies, that’s my fault…… But really? Did you investigate Kurumi’s goals during the time when <Rasiel> was still in a completed state?”

“Un…… Aaahh, well , what you said is half-right.”

Nia cleared her throat with a cough before continuing to speak.

“Naturally, it was before Boy sealed my reiryoku…… I was in my room, when suddenly a black Spirit popped out from the shadows.”

“! Nia, you’ve met with Kurumi!?”

“Moreover, listening to your story, it doesn’t seem like a coincidence. Why did she seek you out……”

As the volume of both Shidou’s and Kotori’s voices rose from being surprised, Nia spread out the palm of her hand as though to tell them to calm down first before continuing.

“Somehow, it seemed that there was something she wanted me to investigate through <Rasiel>. Well, although I honestly thought to refuse, after looking up Kurumin’s Angel, it looked super strong. Ah, I thought I couldn’t win, so I obediently investigated for her. I’m sorry for being faint.”

“……No, your judgment was correct. So, what in the world did Kurumi want to know?”

As Kotori asked, Nia corrected the position of her glasses with a push before answering.

“——Information about the Spirit of Origin.”

“Spirit……”

“Of Origin……?”

In response to what Nia just said, question marks floated above the heads of the Spirits.

“Yeah, it was thirty years ago when the First Spirit appeared in this world. Kurumin wanted to know that the exact location and time that person appeared, and also the power they had.

——All in order to kill that person.”

“What……”

Hearing such disturbing details spew out of Nia’s mouth, Shidou instinctively creased his brows.

“To kill……? The First Spirit? That’s Kurumi’s goal?”

“At least to the extent of how much I know, although even I don’t know why she wants to kill the First Spirit.”

While Nia embarrassingly scratched her face, she muttered, “At the time I didn’t expect in my wildest dreams that <Rasiel> would be taken away, ah.”

Kotori tossed an unwrapped Chupa-Chups into her mouth, stirring the stick up and down as her face showed a difficult expression.

“To kill the First Sprit…… I understand why she’d want to know the power of the First Spirit, but why would she inquire the location and time of when it first appeared in this world……”

“——From 30 years ago, at that point in time to ensure the existence of that Spirit becomes nothing.”

As Origami answered back the exact thing she was trying to figure out, Kotori raised her head in surprise.

“Eh? Do you know something?”

“That’s not the case. But in the past——when I relied on Kurumi in the previous world, she had said such a thing.”

Origami spoke in a quiet tone.

That’s right, in order to save her parents from the fate of their deaths, Origami had once traveled back in time to the past through Kurumi’s Angel <Zafkiel>.

“So that’s it…… By taking advantage of her Angel <Zafkiel>, Kurumi can really accomplish travelling through time. So that’s why she needs the reiryoku Shidou’s sealed up until now. In order to kill the First Spirit, which appeared 30 years ago and erase its existence from history……”

After identifying this point, Kotori made an astringent expression as she scratched her head.

“Aahh, really. That just raises even more questions. Kurumi desires reiryoku to use a bullet to travel back into the past…… For the purpose of killing the First Spirit? Why in the world would she want to do that?”

“From this point onward, we are approaching mere speculation. It is too dangerous to grow invested at this stage with such scarce information, even if the outline of what we do know right now is meaningful.”

Origami spoke back in a flat manner, while staring directly at Kotori. In turn, Kotori gave a defeated sigh as she gently nodded her head.

"……Yeah, thanks for the advice too."

In order to calm herself down, Kotori took a deep breath in and pressed against her forehead with a thud.

"Nevertheless, in order to succeed in the battle with Kurumi, we must clarify her motives as soon as possible. Obviously, the motives of our side have already been exposed, but the aspirations of the other side still remain concealed within fog. No matter how you say it, it's too disadvantageous."

"Un……"

Hearing Kotori's words, Shidou broke out in cold sweat.

Certainly, it was a considerable advantage to know what the other party was seeking, especially in a match where the person who falls in love first loses. If one were to describe the current situation, it'd be like approaching Kurumi completely naked while she was wearing extra layers of armor."

Being forced to be aware of his own thoughtlessness once again, Shidou bitterly distorted an unpleasant facial expression.

Watching Shidou let out such a look, Kotori shrugged her shoulders.

"There's no need to make an expression like a Chihuahua stuck in the rain. Like I said earlier, in that situation you had no choice but to accept Kurumi's proposal. Even if communications hadn't been cut off, what's happening now wouldn't change. Let's talk about what to do next."

"Ah, yes……"

After listening to what Kotori had to say, Shidou also gave an affirmative nod in response.

Then, Shidou patted down his cheeks to bestir his fighting spirit. If he were to allow his sister to get worried about the feelings of anxiety resurfacing on his face, he would be a disgrace as an older brother.

At that moment, Shidou remembered the words that Kotori had mentioned before.

"Ah…… That's right, Kotori. What happened when communications were

interrupted? I was worried because I heard something resembling panic……”

“Ahhh……”

For some reason, Kotori crossed her arms and made a difficult expression.

“Now that I think about it, we still haven’t told you yet…… At that time, there was a strange reaction on <Ratatoskr>’s radar.”

“Strange reaction?”

“That’s correct, although it happened suddenly; I can’t believe it in the least, but……”

“——Allow me to explain that part.”

Then, barging in on Kotori, a voice echoed from behind them.

As Shidou turned in the direction of that voice, his eyes cracked open in wide shock at the figure of the person standing there.

It was a girl about the same height as Kotori. Her hair was tied up in a single ponytail and there was distinctive mole underneath her eye. More importantly, right now her entire body was covered with poultice and a bandage plaster.

“Mana!?”

Over there stood Shidou’s reallyounger sister, Takamiya Mana.

“When did you…… More than that, where did you get those injuries! Are you alright!?”

“It’s no big deal. Just a scratch.”

As Mana smiled while waving her hand with a flutter, Kotori glared at her with a displeased expression.

“You…… If I recall properly, didn’t I let you go to the medical pod for treatment?”

“Haha…… Sorry, I’ll return after I’m finished talking. Just for a second…… There’s something I need to tell Ni-sama and the others.

Mana’s smile quietly faded from her countenance as she turned around, her eyes displaying a more serious gaze towards Shidou.

“What do you want to tell us?”

“Yes, to Ni -sama and the others, while you were talking to <Nightmare>——Tokisaki Kurumi, about what happened during then.”

Mana sat down on an empty chair as she continued on.

——The attack by Ellen Mathers was aimed at Shidou.

Alongside the countless girls she summoned.

“What……”

After being shot with such unforeseen information, Shidou’s breathing turn chaotic for a moment. No, not just Shidou, all of the Spirits present at the scene all revealed astonished expressions.

“H-How……”

“Was such a thing going on……?”

“Gumuu…… A secret hidden to protect everyone… Damn, even I would want to try something this cool.”

“But what in the world are those girls Ellen summoned……”

Mana slowly shook her head in response to Shidou’s question.

“It’s not clear, but it’s the first time I’ve seen so many people with identical faces besides <Nightmare>; to be sure they aren’t an ordinary existence.”

As if having no other alternative, Mana shrugged her shoulders in despair.

However, Kotori resumed to ask Mana another query.

“——And so? Even we knew this much. There’s no way you came all the way here to just say that much, right? Honestly, you sure take after Shidou’s shortcomings in terms of rashness, but even an idiot should be able to judge what is necessary or not.”

Mana raised the corners of her lips in a slight pout.

“It’s an honor to be told so by Kotori-san. ——Well, that’s certainly true, but there’s one thing I haven’t asked Kotori-san yet.”

“——Why couldn’t you predict Ellen’s attack?”

Kotori’s eyes slightly winced, Mana nodding as if figuring she had posed the correct question.

“……? What’s going on? Did Kotori request somebody to guard Mana?”

“There was no such expectation. If I’d known DEM was preparing an attack, I would have told Shidou and the others earlier this morning…… Moreover, even then I wouldn’t have permitted you to deal with them while still recovering. Since it helped in the end, I let it slide; if not, should an iron fist sanction be placed?”

As Kotori glared intently at Mana, the girl murmured a slight laugh to half-heartedly dodge the statement.

“W-Well, on the other hand, putting that aside, I learned of Ellen’s plan to attack just before it happened. But from the beginning of the attack, Ellen suddenly appeared at those precise coordinates.”

“I don’t understand this. Ellen was in a perfect state of stealth; to the extent that we couldn’t event detect her until the beginning of the battle. Mana, how did you learn about this?”

Mana exhaled with reserve.

“Though I hate to say it, the reason is simple. Somebody told me beforehand.”

“Someone told you? Who?”

“——<Nightmare>, Tokisaki Kurumi.”

“……Ha?”

Shidou was so nonplussed that his eyes changed into two blank dots.

“W-Wait a minute, what do you mean Kurumi told you?”

“It’s just as I had said, but let me go on——Yesterday, that woman suddenly appeared in my room. I thought she’d come to attack while I was sleeping, so I cut off her head without asking anything……”

“……”

For Mana to say something so terrible so casually, although it was the firmly rooted cycle of conflict between mutual adversaries, the girl was as aggressive as

ever.

But Mana went on without so much as a sliver of disquietude.

“Several clones then appeared saying they wanted to talk. Well, at the time, I thought she should be able to recite their last words as a knife was aimed at her neck——.”

“Did she tell you about Ellen’s attack?”

“That’s right.”

Mana gave an exaggerated nod in consent, but Kotori’s stringent facial expression towards her didn’t waver the slightest.

“…..So Mana-chan, did you really think it was really clever to keep this secret from me?”

“Un.”

As Mana’s shoulders started to tremble, Kotori replied with a dry smile.

“No, it’s not like that, Kotori-san. I wasn’t trying to hide it, though it’s strange to believe what that woman says in the first place.”

“But didn’t you come to that place because you believed in Kurumi’s words?”

“No…… I thought that it was a trap and you had gotten hurt…… Though if I had told Kotori-san, she definitely wouldn’t have let me go……”

“Hoho? So you did understand. Were you expecting a nice chat about this later?”

“Un, it seems my chronic illness has flared up……”

Immediately afterward, Mana clutched onto her chest, collapsing onto the floor with a puff, but Kotori was more worried about the meaning of this as she leisurely waved her hand.

“Ah, yes, yes, how serious. Next time we’re going to have to accommodate you with an even more rigorous medical institution.”

“Un…… ah, it seemed to be just my imagination.”

Mana quickly stood up as if nothing had happened.

Seeing this, Kotori gave out a sigh as she raised her hand to rethink.

“Anyway, the top priority right now is the issue with Kurumi.”

“Ah, why did Kurumi tell Mana about Ellen’s attack and how did she learn that information in the first place……”

After listening to Shidou, Origami exhibited a faint look when she responded.

“Couldn’t the reason she told Mana the information about Ellen’s assault be that she wanted to simply stop the attack? Since Tokisaki Kurumi is after the reiryoku sealed within Shidou, it is clear she does not want to see DEM succeed. Also, she can command several clones to conduct espionage activities. It’s not unimaginable that she learned about DEM’s plan in the process.”

As Origami indifferently set out her answer, Shidou gave a small groan as he placed his hand against his chin.

“Un…… Well, just as you said……”

“Is there any part you are confused about?”

“Ah…… no, I didn’t mean it like that……”

Shidou returned a rather ambiguous reply.

What Origami had said was reasonable. But why? For a moment, the image of Kurumi’s face flashed in his mind, enkindling a strange discomforting feeling that obstructed Shidou’s thoughts.

Nonetheless, it wasn’t good to bemuse everyone further for such vague reasons. Shidou gently nodded his head.

“No-nothing, anyway let’s prepare for tomorrow.”

“Alright, we’ll continue the investigation from our side. But the most important task is for Shidou to take the initiative and not be caught up in Kurumi’s pace. You absolutely cannot be careless.”

“Aah…… I understand.”

A great many mysteries still beclouded Kurumi. It would be a lie to say that he wasn’t uneasy about being in a match with such a girl.

Yet as long as there was a chance for victory, he would be able to seal her

reiryoku.

In order to calm his mind, Shidou pushed his head forward.

◇◇◇

However, the next morning.

“What……!?”

The early morning ushered the collapsed of the tranquil mind that Shidou had spent the entire night cultivating.

But no other alternative was available, after all……

“——Ufufu, hello, Shidou-san. It really is a good morning today.”

Ready to head for school, Shidou opened the door to find Kurumi waiting there in a soot-black jacket and vaunting an exceptionally alluring smile.

“K-Kurumi……”

“Hehe, what have you been doing, Shidou-san? To have such an expression on your face.”

Seeing something funny, Kurumi discharged a boisterous laugh that gradually turned into slight giggle. Shidou shook his shoulders and took in a profound breath to lull his heartbeat.

Despite his prospects having appeared favourable yesterday, her sudden arrival was all it took to fluster him.

“No…… I was just a little bit startled by you. Why are you here?”

“Ara, ara, is it so strange for classmates to go to school together?”

“……That’s right, it’s not a bit surprising at all.”

Although sweat was dripping down his cheeks, Shidou turned around to retort.

Yes, it shouldn’t be surprising at all. The match against Kurumi had already begun.

It would be better to say that Shidou should have taken care to reflect on that.

However, he couldn't just obediently follow Kurumi's pace either. His mouth gaped open while making a fearless smile.

"But for you to go as far as to meet up with me…… Are you interested in me?"

"Ufufu, and what of it?"

She briskly strode towards Shidou, intertwining her arms round his.

As Kurumi drew closer to him, the sudden bodily contact caused a burst of dizziness for Shidou's health.

"All right, shall we head out?"

In that manner, Shidou was partially pressurised towards walking on the road.

However, having Kurumi take the lead did no harm. Shidou secretly used his free arm to take out a compact intercom concealed in his pocket and placed it in his ear. A few seconds after turning the switch on, a voice was heard coming from the intercom.

"……Un, what's the matter, Shin?"

With a soporific voice calling out Shidou's name with a distinctive nickname, that person was without a doubt Reine.

The existence of support possessing a bird's eye view of the situation soothed his heart a little. As Shidou exhaled lightly, he whispered back in a quiet voice to avoid being heard by Kurumi.

"……I'm sorry, Reine-san. It's an emergency."

"……Is it Kurumi?"

After a momentary pause, Reine seemed to grasp the situation. Shidou took the silence as her positive affirmation.

"……The challenge started sooner than expected. I'll go call Kotori. Meanwhile, you should also talk with her; it's not good to remain silent."

In the absence of a specific communication destination, the intercom had specifications to contact the bridge of the aerial warship <Fraxinus> floating above Tenguu City. Normally, communications from Shidou was handled by its

Commander, Kotori. But right now, Shidou knew better than anyone that Kotori was still in the Itsuka household.

Shidou cleared his throat to show his consent before resuming the conversation with Kurumi.

"——Even so, today's really cold, though that might be natural since it's February."

"Yes, yes, but it will be warmer this way."

After saying that, Kurumi tightened her grip.

"……!?"

Shidou's body froze as he inevitability started trudging unnaturally, just like a robot. But of course, that was to be expected.

Kurumi was surely terrifying. Up till now, having already consumed many people, she truly lived up to the nickname the Worst Spirit.

But before that——she was a beautiful girl.

Sleek black hair and smooth skin, coupled with a graceful and dignified appearance——not only that.

Her body exuded a faint aromatic scent, alongside what seemed to be the fleeting snap of her slender fingers. With each detailed gesture, everything provided a strong stimulus to Shidou's nerves.

"Ugn……"

"Calm down, Shin. Your heart rate is rising."

Just as Reine had said, entrusting himself to his emotions would only lead to ruin. In order to bring peace to his mind, Shidou chanted (a vague recollection of) the Heart Sutra.

However.

"……Fu……"

"Huff……"

Inadvertently, Kurumi breathed into Shidou's ear, and with the unanticipated

sensation, he couldn't help but issue a small moan of lament.

"Ara, ara."

Hearing such amusing reaction stem from Shidou, Kurumi chuckled from the bottom of her heart.

"Shidou-san, you really have such a cute voice.

"You……"

Like always, he felt like a plaything dancing within the palm of Kurumi's hand.

It couldn't go on like this. Attempting a comeback, Shidou unclogged his throat by coughing a few times.

However, precisely at that timing, Kurumi once again nudged Shidou a bit, proceeding to lead him to a different route to school than usual.

"Hey, Kurumi, where are you going?"

"Ufufu, there's still quite a bit of time before class begins. Wouldn't taking a slight detour be fine?"

"Ha……? What are you saying……?"

Uttering so, Shidou gently tapped on the intercom, requesting the judgment of the support side.

After a single beat, the sound of a different voice was heard from the intercom.

"——From here on out, let's first act in accordance with Kurumi's wishes. If there's any danger, we'll have your back."

A quite familiar voice, it was Kotori. It appeared she had rushed to <Fraxinus> from the Itsuka residence.

Behaving as if he was absorbing ideas from both Kurumi and Kotori at the same time, Shidou gently nodded his head to show his consent to both conversations.

"……Okay. I guess it's fine every now and then. Is there someplace you want to stop by?"

"No, I just want to stay a little longer beside Shidou-san."

“Haha…… Those words sure can make a guy happy.”

Shidou laughed as he began to reflect over this simultaneously.

So far he had only been on the defensive; there must be some way or another to break Kurumi’s composure even by a little—— While thinking that, Shidou briefly cried out an ‘ah’ sound.

“That’s right; can you accompany me for a while? There’s a place I want to show you at least once.”

“……Eh?”

Kurumi narrowed her eyes as though amused with Shidou’s tries at a counterattack.

“That’s really something to look forward to. Ufufu, thank you for the trouble.”

“Oh, then should we get going?”

“As you wish.”

When Kurumi responded with a smile, Shidou continued walking on the street while maintaining the posture of his arms firmly cross-linked with Kurumi’s hands.

After a few minutes elapsed, the two of them entered a small rear alley.

Arriving at that place, the sensation of Kurumi’s shaking was being transmitted to his arm.

“……Shidou-san, where is this?”

Kurumi let out a shivering voice while looking out at the view spread out in front of her.

But it was no wonder that happened. After all, the back ally was a gathering place for cats of all sorts and sizes.

That’s correct. Scarce information regarding Kurumi occurred when compared to the other Spirits——But it was well known that she was rather fond of animals (cats in particular).

“Ah, I accidentally came across you here a while ago; it looks like a spot where wild cats gather…… Kurumi, don’t you like cats?”

“I-It’s not like I’ve any particular fondness of them.”

Kurumi tried to cast it aside in a doughty manner. But at a quick glance, it could be easily inferred that the surface of her face flushed with a somewhat red tint.

It seemed that the results had exceeded his expectations. In order to steer clear of agitating all of them, Shidou tiptoed past them and bent down to his knees to gently stroke the back of the farthest out tiger cat.

“Look, they seem pretty familiar with people. How about it, would you also like to try as well Kurumi?”

“……! Well, if Shidou-san would go this far to insist, then I suppose I would have to try.”

Kurumi made a happy expression as if she were waiting for Shidou to say those words.

While squatting down beside him, she extended her hand out to the tiger cat.

However, just as Kurumi’s hand was on the verge of contact, the tiger cat vigilantly elevated its face.

Then, Kurumi took a step forward, making an action beyond Shidou’s expectations.

“It’s all right. I’m not that frightening. Meow.”

Yes, Shidou didn’t hear that wrong. Kurumi had actually said that to the cat in a very coaxing voice. Even then, she proffered her fingertips just like a swaying green foxtail in sync with the cat’s quivering tail.

“……Oh?”

Shidou was stunned. Although he had known she liked cats, he never believed Kurumi could verbalise a voice like that.

“Meow, meow.”

Kurumi didn’t seem to pay attention to Shidou’s reaction as she slowly moved her fingertips closer.

However, the tiger cat seemed to hold Kurumi’s actions as suspicious, and quickly slipped through her grasp and ran away.

“Ah……”

Kurumi was struck by an expression of shock as she looked in the direction the tiger cat fled.

Gazing at a comical expression that wasn’t shown very often, Shidou felt a little sorry as he let out a slight chuckle.

“……!”

At that time, as if noticing at last, Kurumi breathed out a ‘Ha!’ sounding sigh with embarrassment.

“W-What’s the matter, Shidou-san?”

“No…… Haha, sorry, I didn’t mean it in a bad way……”

Shidou spoke out while unable to stop the laughter coming out of his mouth, eliciting a dissatisfied pout from Kurumi. Although her expression was very cute, it wasn’t his intention to upset her. So, Shidou pointed to another cat still rolling on the ground.

“Look, there are still other cats, why don’t you try and stroke them?”

“Forget about it, I hadn’t any intention to pet them to begin with. And in the event that I retry, they will certainly try to flee again.”

As Kurumi spoke out in an annoyed tsun manner, Shidou made a wry smile to comfort her.

“Don’t say such a thing. Hey, hey, you should be fine next time. Meow.”

“……!”

Catching Shidou imitate her previous behavior, Kurumi’s face blushed beet red.

Staring at Shidou with an angry glare, Kurumi abruptly narrowed her eyes, having thought up an idea.

“……You’ve asked for it. Then——”

Kurumi flashed a mischievous smile while delicately tickling Shidou’s neck.

“Hiya!?”

“Ufufu, so it is true. Petting a child right now would make him well-behaved.”

“Y-You……”

Hit by this sudden attack, Shidou’s cheeks turned red while Kurumi stroked his head with a chuckle.

“Ufufu, such a good child. Come, what did you say earlier? Meow?”

“……Ugu. M-Meow.”

Since he had said it was no problem just now, Shidou was unable to pull away from Kurumi’s grasp. For a while Shidou had no choice but to endure Kurumi’s cheerful caress.

——About twenty minutes later, Shidou and Kurumi eventually reached the school, just a hair’s breadth away from the school bell about to chime.

“Shidou!”

“Shidou.”

Inside the classroom, having arrived earlier, Tohka and Origami scurried to call out to him.

Shidou gently lifted his hand in response.

“Oh, Tohka, Origami, good morning.”

“Umu, good morning, Shidou…… That’s not it. Are you okay, Shidou? I was worried about you!”

Tohka wrinkled her brows.

But that was inevitable. Tohka, who lived in the Spirit mansion next to the Itsuka residence, always went to school together with Shidou. It was no wonder for her to be worried sick if he hadn’t appeared in front of the house.

But just as Shidou was all set to apologise for this matter, Origami moved her mouth one step quicker.

“This morning, there was a traffic accident at the intersection of the 2nd district in town. We were worried that you were involved in it because of being late.”

“Eh……?”

Shidou was quite familiar with that crossroad. After all, under normal circumstances, that was the direction he passed through every day to get to school. However, he didn't know anything about this incident at all until hearing this story from Origami.

It wasn't because that accident did not happen until after Shidou had already passed the intersection. No, to put it simply, Shidou did not cross through that intersection today.

Because——

"——Ufufu, good morning, Tohka-san, Origami-san."

At that moment, Kurumi's voice echoed from behind his back, prompting a hue of vigilance to quickly shade Tohka and Origami's facial expressions.

"Mu…… Kurumi."

"As I thought, this is your crafty plot."

"'Crafty plot', it truly pains me to hear that. I was merely walking to school with Shidou-san.

Could there be any wrong in that?"

Under those circumstances, Kurumi gently returned the fierce glares from those two. Shidou could hear the other classmates who were watching the scene whisper, "Shuraba……

Shuraba……"

"Well, it is nearly time for the teacher to arrive. Ufufu, I look forward to today, Shidou-san."

After deliberately provoking them with such an affectionate mannerism, Kurumi sauntered towards her seat.

"……"

In absolute silence, Shidou stared at her back.

There wasn't any special significance.

But how was he to say it?

It felt as though there was a sibylline atmosphere around Kurumi's manoeuvre.

"Mu……? What's wrong, Shidou?"

"! Ah…… no."

Accosted by Tohka without warning, Shidou's shoulders slightly trembled.

"It's nothing. Kurumi's right; we should also head back to our seats."

He placed his bag on the desk.

Tohka tilted her head curiously for a moment, but as the teacher entered the classroom, she turned back to her seat with compliance.

◇◇◇

"Kukuku."

"Kukuku."

"How is it going, me? "

"Yes, yes, with this it ought to be in accordance with the 'schedule'."

"Is it number 193, me?"

"The connection with the liaison has already been disconnected."

"Perhaps already."

"Ara, ara."

"Is it number 238, me?"

"There too is the same."

"Just now."

"Ara, ara, ara."

“It’s really sad.”

“How regretful.”

“How ruthless.”

“How impermanent.”

“Ah, ah, but.”

“Yes, yes, this is no time for us to remain stagnate.”

“It’s almost the time for the next scheduled time.”

“So, let’s head out.”

“Take care, me.”

“Let’s meet again someday.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Some day on the journey to Hades.”

“Some day in a prison within helall.”

◇◇◇

A chime indicating the end of the fourth class resounded throughout the school.

“……”

After hearing the bell, Shidou clenched his fist to heighten his resolve.

This was a matter of course. With the fourth period’s conclusion, it signaled the beginning of lunch break.

In other words, the sound of the bell was nothing more than a symbol for the arrival of lunch time.

Shidou’s battle against Kurumi concerning who would fall in love first had begun

yesterday.

Although the assault this morning was unpredicted, his advantage in this fight lay during the lunch break.

He tidied away his textbook, fishing out a lunchbox (weapon) from his bag in its stead.

Then, just as if this timing had been rearranged beforehand, a silhouette came into appearance at the edge of his sight——Kurumi.

“Ufufu, hey, Shidou-san, why don’t we have lunch together?”

With a grin, she brought out her lunch box not a second later. However, behind that exuberant smile hid a dangerous mood in the air as it was her evident plan to fetch her weapon of choice.

Apparently, Kurumi must have hatched the same idea.

But Shidou also had no intent of being captured by this plan. Feeling a little nervous at the same time, he stood up to respond to Kurumi.

“Ah, of course, but here isn’t good. Since this is a rare opportunity, let’s go the rooftop together.”

“Gladly.”

Kurumi nodded with a smile before turning to Origami and Tohka, who were sitting beside Shidou with eyes full of wariness.

“——How about we go along with Tohka-san and Origami-san? You may also invite Kaguya-san and Yuzuru-san as well. Since it will be harder to cling onto the door like yesterday.”

“Wha……!”

“……”

Kurumi gave a slight giggle as Tohka and Origami each issued their respective reactions.

For a moment, Shidou couldn’t understand why Kurumi would say that, but——he soon immediately guessed the reason.

“Tohka, Origami, maybe the two of you shouldn’t……”

"……"

As Shidou was about to finish, the two of them looked away, flushed with discomfiture. It seemed that they had been eavesdropping behind the door when he had been talking to Kurumi yesterday.

Although at the time nothing had happened, for them to run out he must have really gotten them worried. Shidou made a wry smile to say thank you.

"Anyway, let's go. I don't want to waste our precious lunch break."

"Yes, that's right."

Shidou and Kurumi inadvertently nodded to each other as they set out. Behind them, Tohka and Origami followed suit at a later pace. After going to the classroom next door to invite Kaguya and Yuzuru, all of the pedestrians set foot on the stairs to the rooftop.

Unlike yesterday, the sun was illuminating them with warm comfort. Shidou gently stretched his body as he headed towards the direction of the railing to slowly sit on the bench.

After seeing that Kurumi was sitting across him, they exchanged mutual glances as Shidou opened the lid to his lunchbox.

"……Hm?"

Looking inside the lunchbox, Kurumi stopped breathless for a second.

However, it was impossible to ignore. Since today, Shidou had packed bite-sized cat-shaped rice balls; a special custom-made neko lunch.

"Un, what is it, Kurumi? Something wrong with my lunch?"

"……Heavens, no. I but thought it a most lovely bento."

Kurumi's face was marred with thin layer of blush, eyes somewhat averted to cover it up. In other words, simply looking at it already tugged at her heartstrings.

The reaction was as expected. Shidou jumped at this opportunity, firing the first shot signaling the outbreak of the war.

"Haha, thanks. ——Since I made so much, would you like some, Kurumi?"

"……!"

Having probably guessed Shidou's aim, Kurumi's eyebrows slightly twitched.

The feline bento was not limited to appearance only. The refined taste embodied Shidou's culinary techniques and gastronomic creativity.

So far, Shidou had contacted, talked to, and sealed the reiryoku of ten Spirits. Although the method of capture on tweaking heartstrings varied from one Spirit to another, from his experience, the ' conquer the stomach' approach proved the most effective.

Delicious food could fracture even the innermost line of defense. Of course, Shidou didn't think that this alone could win over Kurumi. But it was quite fruitful for providing a ten-minute opening among the cracks in her castle-wall defense.

"……"

Kurumi breathed sluggishly to suppress her excitement as she threw out a smile.

"Well…… if you insist. But I would feel bad simply accepting a little."

As she spoke, Kurumi unlatched her lunchbox to show him.

"How about a form of exchange here……?"

"……!"

Viewing the contents of Kurumi's lunchbox, Shidou had his turn to stand shocked.

The meal comprised side dishes of bright green, red, and yellow colors well blanked with rice. In spite of the menu being quite orthodox, Shidou could clearly see that the sumptuous repast was handmade with highly meticulous treatment.

Shidou was convinced. He hadn't been the only one sharpening the sword to pierce his opponent.

"Fu……"

"……Ufufu."

By chance, Shidou and Kurumi both laughed at each other.

Observing the two of them, the Spirits all felt a bead of sweat trickle down from their faces.

"M-Mu…… What are they doing?"

“A fierce battle of offense and defense is underway right now.”

“This is between mutual masters reading each other’s strengths……! I’ve read this before in a manga!”

“Understanding. I perceive a tremendous aura in the atmosphere.”

As if not to disturb them, Tohka and the others spoke under a whisper.

When Shidou suddenly raised the corners of his lips, he handed the Nyanko lunchbox to Kurumi at his own pace.

“Come——let’s eat.”

Shidou exposed a fearless smile as the lunchboxes were exchanged.

Faced against this incredible pressure, even Kurumi couldn’t help but gulp down her saliva.

——Taken aback by this unexpected attack, it seemed that she had underestimated Shidou a bit.

However, she couldn’t afford to betray any weakness here. Kurumi feigned composure as she stretched out her hand.

“All right, itadakimasu.”

But——but before reaching the lunchbox, Kurumi’s hands stopped abruptly.

Arranged inside the lunchbox were shiny white cats made from silken rice, black cats whose surfaces were covered in glistening seaweed, and calico cats made from finely chopped katsuobushi. With such an assorted array of cats thronged together, it was as if they were all appealing, “Please eat me, please eat me.” For Kurumi, choosing just one would be an impossibly cruel thing to do.

“Uh……!”

“Hm? What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to eat it?”

Shidou slightly slanted his head as he asked.

Even though his words and expression sounded normal, right now Kurumi spied a villain with a merciless smirk occupy Shidou’s face. In addition, in the space behind him, a hallucination of various breeds of cats all going ‘meow, meow’ obnubilated her line of sight.

Yet Kurumi absolutely could not yield here. As determination fueled her preparation, she picked up one of the black cat rice balls.

"……H-Here, itadakimasu."

After carefully staring at its lovable face, Kurumi hardened her heart and flung it into her mouth.

"……!"

——A bursting impact flavour.

Though she already knew from a clone that Shidou had a habit of cooking, to go so far as to achieve something of this level…

The rich aroma of the organic seaweed tickled her nasal cavity from the inside. The next moment, it seemed a lie for rice balls to be able to maintain the shape described in their name, as the rice melted in her mouth soon after. The image of being surrounded by countless cats mutually cuddling each other was reflected in the very center of her mind.

Ahahaha. Ufufufu.

However, that wasn't all. The moment the white grains of rice scattered, a juicy meat dumpling hidden within revealed itself.

On top of the bite-sized rice ball , there was the cleverness of further adding exquisite design to the meat dumplings. While taking into account the balance between plain rice and redolent seasoning, the thick teriyaki sauce led a raid in waves. Kurumi writhed in pleasure as though being punched by the soft paws of an innumerable number of cats.

"Ahhh……"

Oral cavity, nasal cavity, esophagus, stomach——places that she would normally never be able to reach were caressed by a warm pleasant sensation. Kurumi held down her stammering head with her hand as she barely managed to make a strong smile.

"No——as expected of Shidou-san, it was quite delicious."

“Really, that’s great. Anything you like is made even better.”

A smile suddenly emerged from Shidou's face.

But——hence was Kurumi's turn. Kurumi used her chopsticks to pick up a piece of deep-fried chicken and delivered it to his mouth.

"——Come, Shidou-san, say 'Ah'."

Kurumi spoke as she conferred the chunk of fried chicken.

"Gu……!"

Confronted with the destructive power of this situation, Shidou was helplessly paralysed in place. Yes, this was a dere battle. The one who had their heart snatched first would suffer defeat.

Not just glamorous cooking alone could decide the outcome. How to make the other side to eat their own food also became an important point.

From this perspective, the method adopted by Kurumi was the most successful and reasonable. There existed not a single high school boy who wouldn't be happy given an 'ahh' from a cute girl. It was an ideal choice that turned the tables with the other party's own upper hand.

"Oh, what seems to be the matter, Shidou-san?"

"No…… I've already started going, ah."

While wiping off the perspiration dripping down his face, Shidou opened his mouth to gobble up Kurumi's fried chicken.

"……"

For a moment, it felt like an electrical current had bolted through his entire body.

——Delectable. The quality of the meat was certainly superior, but at the same time the cooking procedure had been handled impeccably as well. Pre-seasoning through the usage of fragrant garlic instead of ginger, at this point the feelings of a maiden were perfectly appreciated.

However, the true value of the fried chicken was in not only that.

Incredible…… Within his mind could he vividly imagine the morning kitchen scenery where Kurumi was wearing an apron over her school uniform and rolling up her sleeves to provide a deft posture to begin cooking.

Without a doubt, Kurumi's goal was to obtain the reiryoku sealed inside Shidou, but this modified nothing of the fact that she had made lunch while thinking about him. This taste was a conscientious crème de la crème made up of cherished thoughts for the person who would eventually eat it.

Since he was capable of cooking on his own, Shidou had few opportunities to eat food prepared by someone else. It could be said that this skill constituted the fangs of a certain kill technique.

"Ufufu, how is it, Shidou-san?"

"……!"

Hearing Kurumi's words shook Shidou's shoulders back to reality. He wiped away the shed tears as he managed to restore his expression to a smile.

"……Ahh, it's so delicious that tears are falling out."

"Ara, ara, you praise me too much."

Kurumi maintained an elegant rhythm as she let out a 'hehe' laugh.

However, it appeared that she had noticed that the flame igniting within Shidou's eyes had not yet disappeared. Kurumi swiftly turned her smile into a fearless expression.

"……"

"……"

Shidou and Kurumi pounced on the opportunity to cross their fields of vision against each other; a few seconds later, the two of them made their move at the same time.

"Do you want to eat one more?"

"The eggs rolls are my most confident work."

Ding! It resounded like the illusion of two mutual double edge swords clashing against each other. Shidou and Kurumi both sensed a droplet a sweat fall down their cheeks as they pursed up the corners of their lips and raised their lunchboxes simultaneously.

"Oh…… Oh, I don't really understand, but it feels like I'm watching something amazing……!"

“Tohka, step down. It’s too dangerous to get involved.”

Origami quickly grabbed Tohka’s shoulders as if to remind her. Then, elsewhere, Kaguya was uttering ‘Ku……’ in lament as she clenched her fist.

“What the hell , the two of them are having such a cool duel……! Yuzuru! We should also have a match to decide the tie breaker!”

“Agreement. Accepting the challenge. ——How about the curry bread I purchased earlier?”

“Haha. It’s a delight of mediocrity. Here, this is my bread, redder than the flow of blood (strawberry jam).”

“Chewing…… It tastes ordinary.”

With unintelligible looks, the Yamai sisters both tilted their heads together.

While they were trying to use bread to decide the winner, the battle between Kurumi and Shidou carried on. One after the other, Shidou delivered his calico cats encrusted in flaky dried fish toppings. Likewise, Kurumi counterattacked by handing out her spinach dish.

“Wow…… This bonito flakes seasoning…… It’s not just purely soy sauce……!”

“Ufufu…… What about this one here too?”

“……!? T-This thermos, inside is miso soup……!?”

As the tug of war pushed on for thirty minutes, the two of them noticed that their lunchboxes had become empty.

“Ha…… ha……”

“U-Ufufufu……”

At the same time, the two of them wiped the rice grains stuck to their cheeks with their thumbs and licked them clean.

“Call today a draw——okay?”

“Fu…… Very well.”

Then, once again in sync, Shidou and Kurumi clapped their hands together with a ‘pan’

sound and bowed their heads to display gratitude for the hospitality and warm meal.

Looking at it, the Spirits who were beside them all exclaimed ‘Ooh……’ as they too clapped their hands in applause.

“……Oh?

Twitching her eyebrow in realisation of something, Kurumi seductively loosened the corners of her mouth, letting out a slight giggle as she narrowed the distance.

“Hey, Shidou-san……”

“W-What is it……?”

“Please stay still for a bit.”

When Shidou’s body stiffened, Kurumi slowly approached her face towards him.

Her delicate skin enclosed his entire field of vision as a sweet fragrance stimulated his nose.

Every time Kurumi’s breath was felt on his neck, it was as though a surge of electricity coursed throughout his very brain.

“Hey…… W-What……”

With Kurumi’s sudden action, multiple question marks filled Shidou’s head. What on earth was she doing? No way, a kiss at such timing? Of course, since that was Shidou’s goal, naturally there was no need to refuse. However, in the absence of a high affection level, a kiss did not mean her reiryoku could be successfully sealed. The opponent was Kurumi.

Even though Shidou did a good job this morning, relying on a lunchbox alone wouldn’t be enough. In other words, it was perfect wasteful kiss, but also a pure kiss if one reversed the meaning. Shidou didn’t know if he should stop her. While deliberating, Kurumi’s lips drew closer and closer—— The next instant, Kurumi’s tongue licked Shidou’s cheek.

“Ha……!”

From this unexpected touch, Shidou couldn’t refrain from barking out.

“Hehe, Shidou-san, there are still a few grains of rice stuck on your face.”

As Kurumi pursed her lips, Shidou stared with stunned eyes as he touched the place where his cheek had been tickled.

“Eh……? Are you serious, is this a lie……?”

Shidou scuffled to double-check his face as it crimsoned. Although his attention had been focused on the luncheon warfare, he had believed that the both of them had already taken care of any leftover rice sticking on their cheeks……

Relishing this sight, Kurumi broke out into laughter.

“Ara, it looks like I understand very clearly.”

“……Hey!”

Although only pleasant words came from Kurumi, Shidou still reflectively narrowed his eyes.

It seemed that his momentary shock had only originated from being licked on the cheek.

Kurumi undeniably saw Shidou’s current state with amusement, but then for the first time, she turned her eyes towards the other Spirits.

“Ufufu, how was it, everyone? A bit embarrassing, what with being stared at so keenly.”

“……!”

“I-I didn’t see anything!”

“Agreement…… Yuzuru and everyone had lunch like usual.”

Faced with Kurumi’s accusation, the Spirits all communicated their own respective thoughts.

Kurumi followed up laughing as if she had once again heard something amusing before slowly standing up.

“Kurumi?”

“Ufufu, I’ll have to excuse myself first. Shidou-san, the lunchbox was truly delicious.”

“Ah, yours was also quite incredible.”

After giving his reply, Kurumi once again brought her face closer to Shidou, gently brining her fingertips to caress his chin.

"……!"

"Hey…… Shidou-san. On another topic, have you any plans on Wednesday after school?"

"Wednesday……?"

That sudden question wrestled in Shidou's head for a moment…… But immediately afterwards, he realized that it was an invitation from Kurumi.

Since there was no schedule at all in the first place; no before that, there was nothing more that Shidou prioritized currently than Kurumi's capture. The only conceivable answer was yes.

"……"

However, after thinking hard for a moment, he looked back at Kurumi with a provocative gaze before speaking.

"I'm sorry, on that day there's something I have to do, which I can't refuse."

"Ara, is that so?"

"Ahh——I mean, I'm thinking about inviting the girl in front of me to a date."

As Shidou said so, Kurumi eyes widened in surprise.

"Ara, ara."

Grinning as if interested in Shidou's choice of words, Kurumi continued on.

"You've really kept up with the same rhythm, Shidou-san. Then, on that day, please give me the time."

"Ahh, of course…… hold on, ' give me the time' shouldn't be taken literally."

Shidou responded to the reply with half-open eyes. It wasn't a funny expression, for when used verbatim by Kurumi, who ate human time, it seemed like some sinister pun.

Kurumi was also seemingly aware of the reason behind Shidou's expression, slightly swaying her shoulders while laughing.

“Ufufu, you’ve sure told me something interesting. Of course, you may regard it as an idiomatic phrase——in the first instance.”

Kurumi suddenly stopped, but then the fingers that were caressing his chin moved up toward his face.

“Simply have that kind of meaning in your head, Shidou-san. I’ve plans to achieve on that day as well.”

“……”

Besides that merry smile, Kurumi’s left eye flashed in a flirtatious light; a too beautiful, too thoroughly calm, intensely cold and shining willpower. Seeing Kurumi’s face with such unobtrusive vision, Shidou helplessly swallowed his breath.

“Then, I bid you farewell. Please look forward to it, Shidou-san.”

Slowly making a more relaxed expression, Kurumi turned around and raised the hem of her skirt to give a small curtsy to Shidou.

After this, she returned to the school building at a brisk pace.

Then, ten seconds passed after the view of her back receded into the school.

“……Ha……!”

Shidou took in a deep sigh, as though the thread of tension had finally snapped.

“A-Are you okay, Shidou!?”

Tohka, who had been sitting on the opposite side of the rooftop, looked over with an anxious face.

“A-Ah…… I’m fine… I’m sorry, I understand your worries…… Ouch, Origami, that hurts.”

Origami was tenaciously wiping Shidou’s face with a wet tissue, one completely transformed after being drenched in sweat.

Then, as if to show appreciation to Shidou, Kotori’s voice could be heard from the intercom.

“That was hard work, but the results aren’t bad. Although Kurumi tried to keep her feelings at the usual magnitude, some considerable fluctuations were

detected.”

“R-Really?”

“Un, well , wavering values won’t defeat anyone, especially until the end.”

“Eh……”

Hearing those words, Shidou felt himself stumble in standing up. Even he was consciously aware of what it meant to be called the Worst Spirit. Therefore, key countermeasures must be made to ensure that Shidou could plan for a good fight.

Yet, after talking to Kurumi face to face, exchanging words, and feeling her touch and breath ——the firm preparedness and resolution had been wrung out from his body as his physique became limp and light.

“But……”

As Shidou was carrying out such self-reflection, Kaguya made a problematic face as she placed her hand against her chin.

“Hey, why’d Kurumi ordain Odin’s day? Is there anything special on that day?”

“No, not at all, what’s going on……”

Suddenly.

As Shidou was racking his brain over Kaguya’s question, there was another person who broadened her eyes as if distinguishing something——it was Origami.

“This——Wednesday.”

Origami briefly spoke out something before taking out her smart phone to begin doing something.

After a few seconds, Origami gave the appearance of complete comprehension when she pointed the screen towards Shidou and the others.

“I’ve understood Tokisaki Kurumi’s motives. She intends to settle everything on that day.”

“What does that mean…… ah.”

While only managing to mutter halfway, Shidou came to a stop upon seeing the phone screen.

Origami nodded her head in consent.

“This Wednesday is February 14th. That day is——Valentine’s Day!”

Despite Origami trying to speak in a quiet manner, her voice revealed a subtle degree of anxiety.

Just then, the alarm for the general preparation bell reverberated throughout the school.

Chapter 3 - A Maiden's Time

"——Thank you for coming here, everyone."

That evening in a room inside the Spirit mansion, Kotori spoke while looking over to everyone. For some reason the lighting in the room was very dim, with the spotlight just illuminating the area around the table.

Meanwhile, Kotori placed her elbows against the tables, posing with her fingers intertwined with each other. Though the reason wasn't understood, it seemed as if her commander impression had increased compared to usual.

Already in the center of the room, Tohka, Origami, Yoshino, Kaguya, Yuzuru, Miku, Natsumi, Nia, and Mukuro, these all-star Spirits had gathered up in full force. Everybody was sitting around the table, each person in a different posture of either caressing their cheeks or stretching their wrists.

"Fumu, what be this conundrum… at the witching hour…"

Mukuro asked while issuing a slight yawn.

However, it was also unreasonable to expect otherwise. The current time was midnight.

Several people other than just Mukuro also looked sleepy…… Well, somehow there were exceptions like Nia, who seemed even more energetic than during the day.

Kotori gently nodded her head and continued to answer Mukuro's question.

"The situation should've been explained to you already. Afternoon today, —— Kurumi invited Shidou on a date on the 14th of February, Valentine's Day."

Listening to this matter, Tohka inclined her head and crossed her arms with a puzzled expression.

"Muu, what is Valentine's Day in the first place?"

"Ah…… sorry, sorry. So it seems that hasn't been explained yet. Well, Valentine's Day is……"

While Kotori was trying to explain, Nia suddenly interrupted her.

"This is…… the day where St. Valentine, called the patron saint for lovers, met his gruesome execution!"

"Wha……!?"

"I-Is it a terrible day……?"

As Tohka and Yoshino made expressions of shock, Kotori comically slapped the side of Nia's head.

"Although the origin is correct, pay attention to the method of expressing!"

"Ehehe, sorry, sorry. Well then, on that day, to commemorate St. Valentine, girls give presents to boys; think of it like that."

"Fumu, a gift."

"Question. What should be given?"

The Yamai sisters asked while symmetrically tilting their heads.

"Well…… although there's no provision of only sending it, in Japan chocolate is generally used."

"Hey!"

Listening to Kotori words, Tohka's eyes began to sparkle and glisten.

"Sending chocolate…… to have such a wonderful day!"

"……Wrong, Tohka. It's okay to be happy, but it's presented to a man by a woman, understand? So you'll be on the other side of the gift.

While Tohka's excitement was starting to cause her arms to shake, Natsumi replied back with her eyes half-open.

"Mu? Umu, I didn't know…… nu? I see, I can't eat it…… No, it's fine, making a gift for Shidou is also very exciting……"

"Your mood seems to have visibly dropped……"

Natsumi said while sweat dripped down from her head. Meanwhile, Kotori let out a sigh and shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't worry, Tohka. Recently friendship chocolates are also in vogue…… More than anything, there'll be White Day on the 14th of the next month. On that day, men who received chocolate from women on Valentine's Day return the favor and give back chocolate."

"O-Oh……!"

Tohka looked at Kotori like a clergyman who had just received a divine prophecy from an oracle. Seeing this sight, everyone didn't know whether to express a pleasant or wry smile.

"Er, Kotori-san, what about it? Although I would certainly be jealous of someone having a date with Darling on Valentine's Day……"

Miku spoke while making a cute motion by pointing her fingers towards her chin.

Then, Kotori returned the gesture by nodding her head.

"Kurumi said that she intends to decide the outcome of the match with that day's date.

Losing means both the reiryoku and Shidou's life are taken away, so we absolutely cannot stand by idly."

"However, even if it is Shidou, I don't think he would admit defeat with the matter of his own life……"

"I think so too, but it appears to be also true that Kurumi wouldn't have brought up such negotiations without feeling high prospects for success. It would not be wrong to be cautious."

"Question. What exactly should be done as a precaution?"

As Yuzuru elevated her arm to ask a question, Kotori nodded while lifting up two fingers.

"There are two approaches to this presumption, the first being that we will also give chocolate to Shidou."

"A reasonable means, chocolate was originally intended to be given."

"Sure, if I was a man and Kurumin was the only one to give chocolate, it would honestly make my heart skip a beat."

Nia shrugged her shoulders. Then, Kotori made a wry smile at the unclear feelings

given the current circumstances.

"Having said that, this is the last day before the 14th. Even for handmade chocolate, there's no problem with the preparations before that day——If anything, the problem starts from here. I want to train Shidou's resistance as much as possible before then."

"Resistance……?"

Tohka tilted her head as she crossed her arms as Kotori continued to speak.

"Yes, that is to say, in order not to be fooled by Kurumi during the date, let's have him immunized before then."

"Hmm. Howbeit, what of immunity and wherefore?"

Faced with Mukuro's question, Kotori replied while pointing her finger upward.

"To put it bluntly——a mature charm."

"…….!?"

In response to Kotori's words, the Spirits started to gossip around.

So that everyone to quieted down, Kotori resumed.

"Tohka and the others saw what happened on that day, so I think they can understand……

As expected, Kurumi is the biggest threat. The wicked woman that, within the palm of her hand, is able to calmly toy with the hearts of men through bewitching behavior, seductive invitation and wiles of a succubus. Since Shidou has never sealed this kind of Spirit before, he must learn how to deal with this type of woman."

"……"

The Spirits all gulped and took in a deep breath.

Likely in order to break up this tense atmosphere, two people raised their hands up in the air energetically. They were Miku and Nia respectively.

"Allow me! I am one year older than Darling. I can be the older sister!"

"Me too, me too! The mature charm of my body is gushing out!"

The two of them spoke proudly while puffing up their chests.

However, Kotori shook her head with expression full of embarrassment.

"It's not about numbers. I'm talking about maturity at the spiritual level. If that condition isn't accomplished, then it would just be a slightly older kid."

"Uchu!"

"Ahha!"

The merciless words sank into Miku and Nia like a knife.

"Uuu, how unforgiving Kotori-san…… I… At least the style of my figure is very mature……"

"Even I am… that…… good at staying up at night……"

"……."

As Miku and Nia indiscriminately argued, they didn't notice Origami hitting their shoulders with a 'pon' sound from behind. The two of them, having been struck at the same time, gave out a 'wan' sound as they clung onto Origami…… Well, for Miku the motives for her hands'

movements were very peculiar.

Despite that, while ignoring those three, the meeting still proceeded.

"It is quite troubling. No matter how strong, it seems that there is an innate desire in the hearts of men to enjoy behaving like spoiled child while being fawned on by a mature older sister."

"Kaka, that is to say, what time it takes for a man to grow up."

"Agreement. Kaguya was also originally a boy. Ah, no wonder."

"What do you mean by that!? Also, what do you mean by 'no wonder'!?"

"Calm down…… Eh, ara?"

Kotori suddenly interrupted her own words.

"Origami, where did those guys go?"

"Muu?"

Tohka look on to the place where Origami and the others were just at. To be sure, just as Kotori had said, the whereabouts of those three people had disappeared.

"Uh……"

"Did they go to the restroom?"

As the Spirits all twisted their heads, Kotori made a quick glance at the door before continuing.

"No matter, they'll soon be back. Anyway, if we satisfy that feeling even temporarily, Shidou's heart will remain calm no matter what means Kurumi will try to employ. That's why we must become Shidou's older sister."

"B-But, Kotori-san, we are smaller than Shidou-san……"

As Yoshino spoke while furrowing her eyebrows into resembling the kanji for eight, Kotori formed an embarrass expression while nodding.

"Well, that's right, but as long as you acquire a mature charm you should be able to get an older appeal regardless of your real age. Of course, if you really become an adult, the effect will be high, but as expected——"

"……That."

As Kotori said that, a single girl timidly raised her hand as if ashamed to be ridiculed.

"Perhaps, maybe somehow……?"

◇◇◇

"Hmm…… Uh……"

Accompanied by a small groan, Shidou slowly opened his eyes As his consciousness was being regained from slowly awakening, little by little the surrounding circumstances gradually became visible.

It seemed that the surroundings were still very dark, with daylight still not permeating through. Although today he didn't have a plan of going to bed earlier than usual…… But at that moment.

"……Hmm?"

Amidst his fuzzy consciousness, as he tried to turn over on his bed, Shidou knitted his brows.

——His body couldn't move.

For a moment, he thought that it wasn't sleep paralysis…… but it was certainly a strange feeling. If anything, it felt as if someone was clinging onto to him.

A warm and soft touch, clearly there was someone else other than himself in this futon.

"……"

Shidou quietly sighed after a moment of silence.

Perhaps if it was an ordinary case, he might have suspected being in a dream or something resembling a physic phenomenon…… yet whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, Shidou had already some knowledge about the cause for such a sensation.

"Origami……? Or Miku? No, maybe it's Nia……?"

With eyes half-open, Shidou felt the strength tightening around his body being relaxed. At the same time, he then lifted up the covers of the futon.

"As expected of Shidou."

"As expected of Darling."

"As expected of Boy."

"Uwaaah!?"

Seeing the three people underneath the futon, Shidou let out a startled scream.

He did not except that all three people of the names he guessed to appear together.

Although there are such reasons because——

More than anything, the three of them were wearing very sensual clothing like baby doll dresses and garter belts.

"Y-You al ……?"

As a result of not understanding what was happening, Shidou's face was teeming with bewilderment.

Yet the three of them merely smiled, coming closer to lean against him.

While Origami was looming over his belly, Miku was moving her ample bosom from right to left, ready to pounce and attack from both sides. Even though he had felt it touching his skin just now, but seeing this gesture caused a completely different sense of tension and excitement to swirl around Shidou's brain.

"Wait…… h-hey……"

"No worries, Shidou, leave your body to us."

"That's right; we older sisters will love you well."

"Yep, if you become wiser here first, then you won't be scared of even Kurumin!"

That said, the three of them leaned over closer. Their flirtatious demeanor and divergent attire caused Shidou's heart to pulsate violently.

But——

"For a man, this is truly incredible. There are rumors that one can be a wizard if they turn thirty without experiencing a woman, but for a person to suddenly be accustomed to being a sage…… Ah, that must because of being a playboy before that. A young playboy!"

TL Note: Playboy (遊び▮) is a pun on the Gadabout (pleasure seeker) class in Dragon Quest 3, which one can then transfer classes to become a sage.

As a result of Nia making her usual joke, Shidou felt the high temperature emitted from his head cool down a bit.

"……Ah really, even though I don't know what you are saying, give me back my room!"

Shidou let out a scream, pushing against Origami and the other's backs in order to drive them out of the room.

"It can't be helped. I'll have to come back again."

"Kya! But an aggressive Darling is also good!"

"Eh, was that Boy's ass just now?"

With each of them leaving their own intended words respectively, the trio left the Itsuka household.

"Geez……."

Shidou breathed out a sigh of relief, swiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve before reentering the futon.

"……However, he couldn't immediately fall asleep.

Although only about half-asleep, he was awakened by Origami's lingerie floating around the futon, forcing his heartbeat to race.

When——

"……Hmm?"

Despite not knowing how much time has passed, Shidou suddenly raised his eyebrows.

Outside the window——for some reason, there was a small clicking sound coming from the veranda.

"What's that noise……?"

It sounded like someone was knocking on the window. Shidou adopted a bewildered expression as he slowly crawled out of bed, rubbing his eyes while walking towards the window, his hand soon grasping onto the curtain.

However, right then, Shidou stopped his hand.

Due to his drowsiness leading to a reduction in his judgement faculties, Shidou didn't notice until then——the abnormality of a situation where someone would be knocking on his window during midnight.

"No way, Kurumi……?"

Shidou twisted his brow as he whispered to himself. Those who would visit him in the middle of the night, yes—— "……No, not necessarily."

Recalling the faces of the people who had just attacked him earlier, Shidou took in a deep sigh…… It's better to say that in comparison to Kurumi, the possibility of those three people striking again was considerably higher.

Anyhow, he would continue to know nothing at this rate. Shidou resolutely opened the curtains.

However.

"Huh……?"

There was nobody, nothing outside the window. On the contrary, when Shidou opened the curtains, even the ruggedness of the fabric sweeping the floor was barely audible.

"That's strange, I was certain……"

Stretching his neck, he opened the window to the balcony. Cold air attacked the

body spoiled by the warm and comfortable futon.

"Uh…… So cold."

While still in his slippers, he looked around the neighborhood. But even then there were no suspicious silhouettes or even birds that woke up early.

Wondering if he was still half asleep, Shidou scratched his head and pressed on to return to his room.

Then, at that moment.

"——Fufu, fufu."

"……!?"

While searching for the whereabouts of the laughter, Shidou felt his body tremble.

"W-Who's there……?"

Startled by the sudden sound of laughter, Shidou looked around his surroundings again.

Following the leader, numerous other voices were heard one after another.

"Hey, isn't that what Itsuka Shidou mentioned before?"

"Well…… that's quite ordinary. A bit unexpected."

"Is that so? That's pretty cute."

"W-What the heck is this……"

With his face flushed with a hue of befuddlement, he looked for the source of the voice.

However, it was likely that whatever could be seen couldn't be considered people.

For a moment, Shidou thought he was talking to one of Kurumi's clones through her shadow.

——No, that wasn't right. The voice echoing in the surroundings was different than Kurumi's.

"Who's there!? What in the world do you want with me!?"

Shidou could not help but call out as his voice echoed through the night sky.

And then, as if to respond to him, laughter filled the surroundings.

——Then, at that instant.

Several pieces of paper fell down from the sky.

"Paper……?"

Shidou slanted his neck as he went to pick up the piece of paper.

However, the moment his hands made contact with the paper, a faint light illuminated the balcony—— "Baah!"

A girl came emerging from there.

"Wa……!?"

As a result of the sudden arrival, Shidou collapsed onto the ground on his backside. The girls, who seemingly found this amusing, let out a slight giggle.

"Haha, was that too surprising?"

"Y-You are——"

Shidou was stunned as he saw the girl's face.

Hearing the very silly question, Shidou immediately held his breath. Despite being semi-conscious, he still felt greatly flustered by the sight. The impact of the scene was just like suddenly waking up.

If the sight he was witnessing was not a dream, nothing would be quite as extraordinary as a girl appearing from a piece of paper.

But Shidou had already heard about the existence of this girl from Mana.

"No way, is this DEM……!?"

As Shidou began shivering, the paper that was scattered about had girls with the same face jumping out one by one.

It was just like the scene where Kurumi had revealed her clones. Faced against a

phenomenon that violated the laws and theories of the world, Shidou was left momentarily speechless.

"Huh, do you know about me?"

"DEM is a really casual way to call it though."

The girls pouted their mouths with displeasure.

However, Shidou could not reply back.

Amidst the myriad of voices coming from all directions, one of the girls uttered something that was difficult to believe.

"Yes, in any case we——can also be considered Spirits."

She had said those words.

"What…!?"

Shidou opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

"S-Spirit……!?"

Yes, the girl had certainly said so just now.

The confusion spun Shidou's head into chaos. It was surely possible that the girl had the power of cloning like Kurumi, but why would a Spirit be with the DEM that was out to killSpirits—— As Shidou was lost in confusion, another girl kept on speaking.

"Ah, we are called <Nibelcol>. A good name, no?"

"Well, because we are created by Otou-sama, it might be a bit different from what you are used to."

"W-What do you mean……?"

Hearing Shidou drifted astray in his response, the <Nibelcol> girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Hehe, do you want to know?"

"Telling you is fine, but there wouldn't be much meaning to it, right?"

"Yeah, because you——are going to die here."

Then, as if too casually, the <Nibelcol> spewed out those words.

The statement bore no malice, not even the slightest faint dust of murderous intent. It was just like a pleasant greeting made when leaving home after accepting a request to go shopping. As a result of the tone of the delivery made to him, there wasn't enough time to react.

"……!"

Nevertheless, the reaction time was still considerably fast when compared to an ordinary high school student. Driven by a less than appreciated experience of being exposed to a fatal crisis, Shidou's snapped his body up from the ground, jumping off the balcony in order to escape from the <Nibelcol>.

However——

"Eh……?"

The next moment, Shidou heard such a voice leak out from his throat.

At the same time as his field of vision was shaking violently, his beaten body collapsed onto the balcony.

Looking down at the bottom of his body, Shidou finally noticed.

——His feet that he used in trying to escape were beautifully cut off.

"Guh…… AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?"

On that note, a tremendous pain struck Shidou, enough to make his mind collapse.

Almost like a flickering and crackling illusion underneath the darkened night sky, the violent stir of emotions and tension made his heart beat violently as blood diffused profusely from that section of his leg.

"Did you think you could escape?"

"No, no, because father told us so."

"You will meet your end here."

The <Nibelcol> still articulated in a casual tone.

But then, even as his face was smeared in a pool of blood, his eyebrows could only give off a slight twitch rather than distorting in pain.

"Eh…..? How amazing, what is this?"

"Your leg is burning? As if to reattach to the severed foot?"

"Huh…… This must be the regeneration ability of <Camael>. Not bad, this one."

The <Nibelcol> spoke with interest in the spectacle of the severed foot, just like a child who had found a rare insect on the side of the road.

To be sure, a flickering flame was surrounding the cut section of his leg, despite not knowing how the flame was originally lit. The fierce burning sensation was superimposed on the violent pain. Wincing in agony, it was a feeling that mercilessly ravaged his very nerves.

However, just as the <Nibelcol> had said, the flames were also trying to reunite the severed limbs with each together.

——It was the healing flame possessed by Kotori' Angel, <Camael>.

"I see, I see, it's certainly a troublesome thing to deal with."

"Un, something is wrong, to not die even after being killed."

"Well then, Otou-sama's request cannot be fulfilled, what should be done?"

The <Nibelcol> tilted their heads in confusion as they looked to each other to consult.

But just a moment later, the <Nibelcol> nodded to each other before once again turning their attention to Shidou's body.

"Well, there's only one way."

"Yup, there is only one way."

"——To keep killing you until you die."

At the same time the <Nibelcol> said that, Shidou felt a tremendous impact struck throughout his entire his body.

"……!?"

His field of vision was dyed with a red hue as attacks delivering an even more intense pain came about.

The sensation of pain whizzed through his nervous system, gnawing away at his very sense of self. If it had not been for the protection of <Camael>, an ordinary person would have long died from shock.

Shidou could not even issue a sorrowful cry anymore.

In spite of wanting to use the Angel of sound, <Gabriel>, to lessen the pain——it was too late.

The <Nibelcol, without neither rest nor a sense of humaneness, attacked every inch of Shidou's body, piercing, crushing, chopping—— Finally, Shidou's consciousness sank into darkness.

◇◇◇

"……Uwaaaaaaaahhhhhh!?"

Raising a scream as if his throat was about to collapse, Shidou jumped out of his bed.

A few seconds later, Shidou looked around to see his own familiar room. From the window, the sun had already risen high into the sky.

"……!"

With that brief moment, Shidou hurriedly began to check his body.

After using his hands to confirm that there were no holes in his chest or abdomen and his feet were uncut, Shidou exhaled a large sigh of relief.

"……Even for a nightmare that was too terrifying, hey……"

As he said that, while wiping his forehead, his sleeve was drenched in sweat. It wasn't at the level of simply sweating during the night anymore. It was as if Shidou fell asleep while under a tropical forest squalall.

However, that wasn't surprising. The nightmares that Shidou had been seeing so

far—— although he didn't want to recall them, still happened forcibly midway. ——While ruminating, his body could not help but shiver.

In the end, how much anxiety was needed to have that kind of nightmare……or relatively speaking, which parts of it were exactly from a dream?

Shidou shook his head as if trying to get rid of the severe pain still persisting in his head. He then stood after pushing up the now damp futon.

With the wind fluttering against his chest, Shidou decided to head down to the first floor to take a shower.

"……Hmm?"

On the way down the stairs, Shidou swayed near the edge as his eyebrows twitched. An alluring smell was drifting around the first floor, 'ton, ton, ton'…… and the gleeful sound of a kitchen knife hitting the chopping board.

That's right——just like someone was preparing breakfast.

"Kotori……?"

Shidou murmured to himself while stretching his neck.

It was inevitable to think that since only he and Kotori were in the household right now.

Although breakfast…… or rather every meal of the day was basically his job, perhaps he could have been running late due to the nightmare and Kotori decided to take the initiative in making breakfast herself.

However, one uncomfortable sense of feeling still remained. Could Kotori be able to handle the kitchen knife so skillfully……?

"……Eh?"

Seeing the figure in the living room, Shidou's eyes turned into two blank dots out of surprise.

"……Un? Oh, good morning, Shidou."

The woman, who was sitting on the couch, waved her hand to greet him.

However, Shidou could not return the gesture. With his mouth wide open, he could only stare in open bafflement.

It couldn't be helped, as sitting there was Kotori, while looking even older than him.

A great contradiction appeared from a greeting of just five words. Shidou, thinking that he was still dreaming, pinched himself, only to find that it no more than hurt.

Her age struck him as around twenty years old. With slender hands and feet alongside a mature face, she hadn't tied her hair in twin-tails, but as a substitute, her black ribbon was attached onto her wrist.

However, what was most eye-catching was her chest. Kotori's breasts, which were normally modest for a girl her age, had expanded to an unnatural degree.

Such was Onee-san Kotori, who was sitting on the sofa, only wearing only a barely buttoned-up shirt and watching TV somewhat carelessly. As it stood, no matter how she looked, her appearance had the charm of an office lady prior to going out to work.

"What's happened, what is it? ——Ah, were you fascinated by Onee-san's bare feet? Hey, well Shidou is a boy too."

As Shidou opened his eyes in shock, Kotori flashed a devilish smile and deliberately lifted up her leg. Peeking at the hem of her white shirt and the shimmering, beautiful leg lines, Shidou could not help but hold his breath.

"……! N-No, that's not it! Kotori…… right? No, no, what the heck is going on……?"

"Eh? What about it?"

"No, even if your body suddenly grew, that chest is too unnatural——Gaha!?"

In the middle of speaking, Kotori threw a couch cushion at him. Shidou had his body bended backwards.

"Shidou-san."

While Shidou was rubbing the nose that was directly hit by the cushion, another voice came from the direction of the kitchen.

Looking over, he saw that Yoshino, who had displayed the same kind of growth, was preparing breakfast.

With hair tied together in a ponytail and an apron of a simple design, she looked exactly like a young housewife.

In addition to that, there was the figure of three small girls next to Yoshino's legs. After being confused for a moment, he soon realized they were Origami, Miku, and Nia after having their appearance shrunken in size. For some reason, there was a sign hanging below their neck that said, 'We are really sorry for sneaking in'.

"A miscalculation, but I will not give up. Who says someone of younger appearance cannot be an older sister?"

"Ya! Why did we get smaller! I would also like to seduce Darling!"

"Ahhh, well it is easier for people who have contrasting objects to understand. Look, because of our existence, wouldn't ordinary young women be able to show wifely attributes?"

"Wa……!? T-This is really……!"

After listening to Nia, Miku for some reason looked as if she had received something similar to divine revelation. After that she put on a spoiled look as she hung around Yoshino' legs.

Yoshino made a wry smile as she gently stroked Miku's head. Shidou looked on as their lines of sight intersected. On her left hand, the rabbit puppet <Yoshinon> (for some reasons unknown attached with a fake mustache) beckoned to him with a slight wave.

"Shidou, it seems that mama wants you to taste it. By the way, I am the father."

"That…… Please, can you do that? No, is it impossible……?"

"Eh……? A-Ah……"

Despite still not knowing anything, Shidou obediently walked to where he was told. Then, he took the small dish from Yoshino's hands, tasting the flavor of miso soup.

"Un…… It's delicious. The taste of the soup broth is well accented."

"Really? That…… that's great."

Yoshino expressed a faint smile.

It was different from the usual Yoshino, overflowing with a graceful and inclusive atmosphere. Shidou's heartbeat involuntarily sped up.

However, Shidou immediately reconsidered as he shook his head from side to side.

"……That, no, no, it's not like that. What is this in the first place? This isn't a late night dream, is it!?"

As Shidou cried out, a small Origami approached his side and gave out a reply.

"Part of training."

"T-Training……?"

"Yes, on the coming 14th, in order for Shidou to hone his resistance against the charm of Tokisaki Kurumi's temptation."

"Hone resistance…… How is that supposed to be done?"

"You should follow your usual routine. However, we will be monitoring your heart rate and degree of excitement. In order to ensure it doesn't exceed a certain value, I want you to maintain your heart beat under control."

"Ha……"

Shidou scratched his face while giving back a vague reply. Then, Kotori added something from behind him.

"Ah, there is a proper penalty, so don't worry? Each time the excitement goes above the caution level for more than ten seconds, an illustration sketched by Shidou during his olden days will be uploaded to SNS."

"Damn, I thought there hasn't been much of that recently!"

As Shidou cried out in a shrill voice, Kotori merrily laughed. It looked exactly like an older sister teasing her brother.

Although it would be false to say that there was no dissatisfaction, he knew from experience that nothing could be done against this. Shidou sighed as he turned to Origami.

"……Then why did Kotori and Yoshino become older sisters?"

"We are approaching Shidou as older sisters to see if your heart strings can be stirred."

"Excuse me, but is it also to test my limit!?"

As Shidou could not help but cry out, Origami nodded her head.

"Then, it is okay even if you are close to being forced near it."

"T-This, so to speak, is also a matter strangling on the thresholds of life…… although in a certain sense it's a matter of life and death at the social level……"

"Is that so?"

In the brief time Origami spoke, she snapped her ring finger.

Recognising that signal, Nia and Miku seized the hem of Yoshino's dress, pulling it apart in a single breath.

The next instant, the right and left sides split apart, leaving only the apron. The chastely wife changed into the face of nighttime in the blink of an eye.

"Ki-ya……!"

"What……!?"

For this to suddenly happen, Shidou couldn't help but roll into the black and whites of his eyes. However, Shidou was not the only one surprised. Yoshino, whose cheeks were flushed with a red hue, fell onto the ground.

He was pressed against an older sister approaching the exact opposite of beforehand, but an odor of immoral seductiveness caused Shidou's body to involuntarily remain frozen in place.

In an instant, a buzzer somewhere in the room issued out a beep sound. It seemed that Shidou's heartbeat had crossed over the acceptable parameters.

"Ugu……!"

Somehow, he had to hurriedly slow down the speed of his heartbeat. Shidou quickly turned away his line of sight and quickly grabbed the coat hanging from the chair to cover Yoshino's shoulders.

However, in the next instant, the next assassin appeared before Shidou's field of vision.

"Shidou…… that's not it! Itsuka-kun! Right now class will begin……!"

He didn't notice how long she was there, but standing before him was a teacher-like Tohka wearing glasses and a suit that highly emphasized her curves.

Needless to say, she also looked older than Shidou, her body grown to be around 20 years old. But even though the size of the suit was a little bit too small , the exceptionally sensual body lines were strongly emphasized, influencing Shidou's eyes to instinctively wander towards the chest area.

"Muu, what's wrong, Itsuka-kun?"

"Ah, no……"

While diverting his eyes away, Shidou coughed twice as if to gloss over the

matter.

In front of Shidou, Tohka let out a puzzled expression. Even though her body was excluding erotic temptation like a weapon, the person in question wasn't even conscious of it. The gap made Shidou's heart tremble even more.

However, Tohka did not seem to notice this point. While walking in rhythm like a model, she guided his hand to let him sit down on the table beside the chair.

Then, she placed down another chair to sit down on beside him, posturing her body to cuddle closer to Shidou.

"H-Huh……?"

"Now Itsuka-kun, Tohka-sensei's lesson will begin. With me…… mu?"

Tohka inexplicably knitted her brow, taking a notepad from her pocket to double check the text written there.

"Oh, right. To carry out that prohibited extracurricular lesson. Are you prepared? Eh, first from hygiene in physical education, stamens and pistils are……"

"Who cast these roles to you guys!"

Shidou gave out a scream mixed with frustration as he vigorously stood up from the chair.

"Mu, where are you going, Itsuka-kun!"

"J-Just to wash my face……!"

Shidou ran to the bathroom in order cool down both his flushed cheeks and the blood flow rushing to his head. The alarm from the beginning had been ringing non-stop. As bad as it was, he had to first try to calm down his emotions.

"What……!?"

However, upon opening the door, Shidou felt rigid once again.

The reason was simple. Natsumi was standing there wearing only a single towel.

Needless to say, this Natsumi was not the usual Natsumi. It was the Natsumi that had appeared as an adult though the Angel <Haniel>.

Having been caught in confusion, seeing that figure made Shidou finally aware of

what had caused Kotori and the other's transformation.

"Ara……?"

Natsumi greeted him with a smile as she turned her eyes over.

As a result of having just taken a shower, her wet hair was still clinging onto her glossy white skin. Perhaps there was nothing more gorgeous than this scene.

"Ufufu, good morning, Shidou-kun. How regrettable, a few minutes earlier, and I wouldn't have had my towel on."

"……! You, what are you saying……"

At those unexpected words, Shidou's flushed face grew even redder. Then, with a mischievous expression, Natsumi stroked his chin with her fingertips.

"Or did you wait a minute in order to take it off yourself? Fufu…… what a naughty child."

While saying that, Natsumi grabbed Shidou's hand and drew it towards her chest.

"Wait……!?"

Shidou pulled back his hand in panic. However, as a result of the excessive force, the momentum directing his hand caused him to fall backwards.

"Oww!"

Having struck the back of his head, Shidou's cheeks winced in pain as he gently rubbed that area.

At that point, a shadow of a figure suddenly appeared overlooking him.

"What……!?"

With erratic breathing, Shidou's eyes were forced wide open.

That's right, what appeared there was Kaguya wearing a white coat over a suit, all in one it looked like a female doctor. Meanwhile, Yuzuru was like a hospital nurse with a dangerously short skirt.

"Kuku, what's wrong? Does it hurt somewhere? Let me take a look at it."

"Identification. Kaguya, even after finally being turned into an adult by Natsumi's

power, it is wasted by that manner of speaking."

"……! H-How annoying! Isn't the way Yuzuru speaks also the same!"

Just like that, the two of them began their usual skirmish over a trivial matter.

The issue was not the problem, the problem was——how the two of them were arguing while wearing short skirts just above Shidou's face from the ground level.

"……!"

As the siren rang sharply, Shidou clumsily got up on his feet and hastily walked into the corridor.

Anyhow, he had to calm down his heartbeat first. So, he aimed to make a sprint past the entrance and head outside.

However, there was another person's shadow there, as if to silently stress the last gatekeeper's identity.

"Mun. Whither are we bound, Nushi-sama?"

"Mukuro……!?"

So, Mukuro, who had also had her body transformed into that of an adult just like everyone else, stretched her hands out to block the entrance while dressed in a kimono.

But it was not just an ordinary kimono. With a dazzling patterned design around the sash coupled with boldly exposing her shoulders, this was the so called courtesan-style kimono.

"Well, ah……"

Mukuro, having also grown through Natsumi's power, had her sensual body reach new heights in destructive capacity, comparable to that of a tactile nuclear weapon. Step by step, she marched forward with a seductive manner of footwork.

The siren was ringing even louder than before. Shidou stopped Mukuro from approaching and opened the door to escape outside.

——However.

"Mun, prithee halt, Nushi-sama."

"Wa!?"

The moment he opened the door, from behind, Mukuro grabbed the hem of his trousers, causing him to fall forward.

However, Shidou did not fall down.

To be precise, his face was currently buried in the breasts of the person who standing there before the door was open.

"What…… is…… eh!?"

"……Hmm?"

Amidst the turmoil inside his head, Shidou heard a quiet voice come from outside. Carefully raising his head, he found that the person was <Ratatoskr>'s analytic officer, Murasame Reine.

"R-Reine-san……! I'm sorry——"

"……Ah."

But before Shidou could finish, Reine seemed to understand what was happening as she slightly nodded her head. Then, she placed her hand behind the back of Shidou's head.

Once again, his face was buried in her chest as she gently stroked his head.

"……Be good."

"———————!?"

As the inside of Shidou's head was filled with confusion and embarrassment, he heard an 'hoh' exclamation coming from the Spirits behind him alongside the clapping sound from a round of applause.

◇

Several hours after the commotion in the Itsuka residence.

With the help of Natsumi's <Haniel>, Kotori and the others had their appearances restored.

Eventually, they arrived at a specialized confectionery shop in the main street of Tenguu City.

While looking at everyone, Kotori placed her hand on her waist as she spoke.

"Okay, everyone, look at this. On the first training field for Shidou, thanks to everyone's efforts, we've achieved certain results."

As Kotori said that, Nia and Miku both spoke something in a whispery tone.

"Really, huh? I feel that the total results were achieved by Reinechino."

"It would have been better for us participating in the battle as well."

"Uohon!"

As if hearing them, Kotori irritatingly cleared out her throat to get their attention.

"So, I think we should move on to the next strategy."

Yes, that was also the reason why Kotori and the others were visiting this place.

That is to say——in order to make handmade chocolate for Shidou on the 14th.

"Look for any material you like. Although the bare minimum of goods have already been explained, if you still don't know what to buy, feel free to ask me or Reine. Alright?"

"Umu!"

"Yes……!"

"Understood."

As the Spirits each replied, they all scattered around the store. Kotori breathed out a 'well now' as she set them all off.

"Let's head out too."

"……Ah, alright."

When Kotori said that, a reply came out behind her from Reine.

Right now, Reine was wearing neither her <Ratatoskr> uniform nor her white lab coat from school. Instead, she was dressed in an elegant and colorful tunic, with the face of a stuffed bear with a distinctive stitch mark on its face peeking from her pocket. Somehow, it gave off an awfully surreal sensation.

It was not a coincidence that she had visited the Itsuka residence. Originally, Kotori had asked her to supervise the material selection and production of chocolate.

"Well then, we should first start from the basic material for chocolate……"

While muttering, Kotori walked into the inner area with Reine accompanying her.

It was the time where it should be in season for this shop. A wide variety of chocolate was lined up side by side in a display shelf. There were even gaudy billboards marked with homemade chocolate recipes.

"Hehe, there are quite a few different types."

In any case, unlike the ready-made items lining up in convenience stores and other places, transparent packaging had been applied to ensure that the table of contents for ingredients be simply written down. It seemed that the ratio of cocoa beans and distribution area varied with each production. When viewed from afar, such words would emulate a beautiful gradation in tone.

In front of the shelf stood the figures of five girls. They were Tohka, Yoshino, Natsumi, Kaguya, and Mukuro respectively. Each looked on with serious eyes, carefully scrutinizing the shelves of the chocolate.

"How is it, everyone? Anything look desirable?"

Hearing the sound of Kotori's voice, Tohka abruptly turned around.

"Oh, Kotori. Muu…… everything looks good, but there are too many."

"Yes…… I do not know which one is better."

"Ne, some of them look too simple."

"Hmm, honorable sister, what demarcates Venezuelan cacao from that of Colombia?"

"Eh……?"

Upon being questioned by Mukuro, Kotori felt a cold drop of sweat fall down her forehead.

Although it could be said to be handmade, Kotori's experience in making chocolate was limited to only helping her mother finish some misshapen creation from a commercially available handmade kit. It was impossible for her to tell

something as nuanced as detailed flavor differences due to area of origin.

Nevertheless, despite not understanding the subject fully, she had to reply due to what she said earlier.

Somewhat dumfounded, Kotori's eye's sank down as they spun around.

"Er…… um, that's right…"

So at that time, seemingly aware that Kotori was in trouble, a hand was placed on Kotori's shoulder——it was Reine's.

"Reine……?"

"……Hmm."

After giving a nod that seemed to say ' leave it to me', she turned around to look at everyone.

"……Among cacao beans, the flavorful aroma comes from Criollo seeds, the strong resistance from diseased Forastero seeds, as wellas Trinitario seeds, which have inherited both advantages——"

"……M-Muu……?"

Hearing Reine's explanation, Tohka made a confused face.

No, not just Tohka, the other three had the same befuddled expression on their faces.

Nonetheless, it seemed Reine had predicted such a reaction from them. She straightened her finger and pointed it upward as she continued.

"……Rather than trying to distinguish cacao beans, it would be easier to understand it through the proportions of cocoa and milk. It wouldn't be wrong to think that a darker color would be bitterer and a lighter color sweeter."

"O-Oh, I see."

As Tohka exclaimed with her a fist striking down on the palm of her hand, she turned once again to the display rack. Yoshino, Natsumi, and Mukuro followed suit and also began to decide the color of chocolate.

"Sorry about that, you were a huge help."

"……I don't mind."

As Kotori said that, Reine once again turned her attention back to her.

"……More than that, Kotori, what kind of chocolate do you want to make?"

"Well…… honestly I'm still lost. Just melting the chocolate into the mold isn't that tricky, but I feel I'd fail at the more delicate matters……"

"……Hmm, I don't think it's necessary to think about such complicated matters. After solidifying, decorating white chocolate would be enough to show the individuality. Although it is somewhat cliché, what matters are the feelings attached."

"Un…… I wonder if that's the case."

"……Ah, but listen, when giving chocolate, would simple steps in the cooking process make a man uncomfortable?"

"……!"

After listening to that, Kotori eyes opened wide in exclamation as laughter leaked from her mouth.

"That's right, it certainly seems what I thought was too complicated."

Indeed, if it were Shidou, no matter what kind of chocolate, he should be happy to accept it.

"Thank you, Reine."

"……Oh."

As Kotori thanked Reine, Tohka and the others were picking up what they needed from the shelves. Tohka had chosen milk chocolate with a nice balance in sweetness to place in her shopping cart.

At that time, her eyes turned to the area next door.

Over there were many materials for decorating sweets, such as pen-shaped chocolate and small heart-shaped sugar confectionery.

The first ones to the other side were the Yamai sisters. Holding up the silver

confectionary beads and edible golden leaves with their hands, their eyes glimmered with an 'Oooh' of amazement.

"Eh? How deceptive, can you eat this? This isn't wrapping paper?"

"Confirmation. It is written as edible in the package."

"Seriously……? K-Kuku… If there is such a thing, it can even make my phosphorescent Kreuz cross appear in this world……"

An evil smile emerged from Yuzuru's face as she was holding the golden leaf in her hands.

As Kotori formed a bitter smile at the sight, she heard Miku and Nia's voices calling from the other side.

"Kotori-san, Reine-san, I have a chocolate in mind, but what kind of materials need to be collected?"

"Ah, same here, same here. I've a headache when it comes to cooking."

"What kind do you want to make?"

Hearing Kotori ask that, Miku and Nia made a gesture with their hands as they continued to speak.

"Well, I guess that I want to make something sticky at room temperature, a type of chocolate that wouldn't solidify…… ah, but not a perfect fluid either. Specifically, I want a viscosity that can also be applied to my body."

"And I want the type that would make Boy's teenage vigor grow 100 times from eating. But what should I put in it? As expected, soft-shell turtle?"

"Make ordinary chocolate!"

Kotori made a long sigh after scolding the two of them.

For once, Miku and Nia were supposed to be the older ones among the spirits. However, Kotori felt that it was like dealing with two very large children.

At that moment.

"……Hmm?"

Noticing something there, Kotori suddenly looked around the vicinity.

Whether near the chocolate or decoration shelves, there was one Spirit whose whereabouts she couldn't find.

"……Hey, where did you go, Origami?"

After first searching the packaging and ribbon section, she thought to look around the entrance to the shop.

Then, Origami's figure was spotted coming out from the home center store opposite from the confectionery material store where Kotori and the others were at.

"……Huh?"

Kotori furrowed her eyebrows as she saw Origami come back to the confectionary store with a shopping bag in her hand.

"Well, where have you been? You should know that we're making chocolate."

"Of course, I went to procure the necessary items."

Speaking with full self-confidence, Origami showed her bag to Kotori.

When looking inside, she saw that there were several cylindrical containers used to pack something.

"……What is this?"

"Silicon."

"……What are you going to use it for?"

"Mold making."

"……What kind of mold?"

"Me."

Origami replied back without even the slightest particle of hesitation.

With that brief answer, Kotori finally understood what she was thinking. ——The point being that Origami was attempting to create a one-to-one size ratio of an Origami model chocolate.

Kotori breathed out an even larger sigh, as if she was exhausted of all air.

"……No, please stop. No matter how tolerant, even Shidou would refuse if you did that."

"But this is the only way to combat against Tokisaki Kurumi."

Origami uttered with an extremely serious expression. Looking at that face, it seemed that she had thought so full-heartedly. Obviously she was very clever, but what had led to this idea? Kotori couldn't understand that.

Once again, Reine made an expression as if saying 'leave it to me' before stepping forward.

"……Indeed, you've thought of something amazing Origami. However, there may be one problem."

"Problem?"

"……The quantity. The volume of the human body is immense. Naturally, gentle Shin would never want to waste your humble gift. As a result, he will obviously consume excessive carbohydrates within the expiration date of the chocolate."

"……!"

Origami's eyes were roused wide open after hearing Reine's words.

"I didn't arrive at that conclusion, how embarrassing."

"……That was because you were thinking about Shin. But now, we should make it into a plan that would also take Shin's health into consideration."

Listening to that, Origami gently nodded her hand.

"I will do so. Downsizing while maintaining quality is difficult with manual work, we need to prepare a 3D printer as soon as possible."

"……"

Origami's eyes were filled with determination as she clenched her fist. Looking at this, Reine could only remain speechless, scratching her face.

Kotori took in a sigh while placing her hand on Reine's shoulders.

"Although it is a long awaited holiday, we've really given you some trouble. Reine…… your salary will be increased so please forgive me."

"……No, I do not mind. I was planning to go shopping, since there are some materials I need to buy here as well."

Reine said so while full of her usual sleepy tone.

From this unexpected answer, Kotori's eyes rounded into complete circular spheres.

"Reine, are you making chocolate as well ? Who are you giving it to?"

"……Hmm? Well, to everyone that has been taking care of me every day, from the <Fraxinus> crew to colleagues from school. I'd like to prepare it for Shin, but won't he already have his hands full with what he'll receive from the Spirits?"

Reine spoke with her hand placed against her chin, as if in deep thought.

Kotori let out a small 'hah' sound as she shrugged her shoulders.

"What's with that list of guys, and here I thought Reine had found a sweetheart to give too."

"……I'm sorry for failing to meet your expectations. But at this time, it has nothing to do with such things."

Reine gently exhaled while saying that.

Kotori gazed upwards in order to once again look at her face.

She had slender arms and legs along with an unmatched voluptuous bust. Despite the dark circles surrounding her eyes looking a bit unhealthy, it was still compensated by her lovely facial features.

Resourceful and intelligent, she was able to deal with everything seamlessly. In spite of being older than Kotori, she was a mature woman with the capacity to build a comfortable friendship without appearing too humble or overbearing.

If someone were to ask Kotori to list a woman that they aspired to be like, then Reine would be without a doubt the best among the crowd. The world of men would obviously not turn a blind eye to such a woman, but she had never heard talks about topics of love from Reine before.

"Recently……"

"……Hmm?"

As Kotori repeated Reine's words, Reine turned around towards Kotori while slightly tilting her head.

"That reminds me, I've never heard of this kind of topic from Reine before. Was there one long ago? Something like——a lover."

"……Well."

As Kotori's eyes sparkled with curiosity, Reine scratched her head as if a little bit troubled.

This was indeed a rare reaction. Kotori could not help but feel some enjoyment, with the corners of her mouth laughing while slowly walking to Reine's side.

Noticing now, Kotori saw that the rare topic of love caused the Spirits to gather back around, listening intently. Even for the Spirits, they were teenage girls who showed a natural interest for such stories…… Well, there are people like Tohka who came because others had gathered together. The method of thinking for these types of people was also not impossible.

"Say, it can't hurt. Come on, come on, hurry and own up to the facts."

Kotori spoke in a cheerful tone as if to represent everybody else. In return, Reine gave an audible sigh as though she had given up.

"……Ah, well , that's right. There was——only one person."

Somehow, she looked a little melancholic as she looked up and spoke. The Spirits, deeply intrigued by this issue, all said 'Oh……' at the same time.

"Ah, I see. If it is Reine, shouldn't it be more than welcome, right?"

"Right, you have a good man? Then say it, it's not a mixer here so there's no need to be embarrassed."

"……That, how to say it. I don't thinking it's what you are imagining, being favored by the opposite sex."

Reine spoke ambiguously as if to gloss it over.

Kotori gave an ' alright' exclamation to muddle through being humble before continuing on.

"What about it, what kind of person was this lover? Having someone like Reine, he must be a pretty good person, right?"

"……That's right. He was…… a kind person. A very kind person."

Ruminating over repeating herself, Reine gently closed her eyes.

"……I dare say that I will never be able to go beyond him in my heart. He will always be my first and last lover."

"……"

Words filled with such sorrow interrupted Kotori's questions for a moment.

But Kaguya, having not read the mood, titled her head curiously.

"……Eh, then why would you break up? If you even now feel that you like him ——"

"——Hey!"

Kotori let out a short interjection to stop her from talking. Having finally understood what was going on, Kaguya diverted her eyes as if to apologize for speaking up.

——From the way Reine was talking; it looked like a story from the past. However, even now, it seemed Reine kept thinking about him.

To say that knowing the origin of this story was boring would be a lie. However, being forced to snoop around like this would be too disrespectful. Kotori took in a deep breath before letting out a single thought that came from her chest.

"How lovely."

Hearing those words, Reine's eyes opened in surprise.

"……Is that so?"

"Yes, that person must be so happy you're thinking about him."

As Kotori said that, the other Spirits didn't hesitate to nod together in order to show their consent.

"Yes…… I think it's very beautiful."

"Approval. It is amazing that Reine has such a bittersweet past."

"Hey, reality is much stranger than manga. In this respect, a real story is

unattainable compared to fictional work. Reality will attack without such foreshadowing or development."

"Ufufu…… such a lovely story, it's a bit enviable."

——At that moment.

While everyone was speaking loudly, Kotori heard something somewhere that caused her eyebrows to tremble.

It took about three seconds for that voice to be salvaged from Kurumi's memories, her body instantly tensing up as she turned over.

"Kurumi……!?"

That's right, though it was unknown how long she was there, the Worst Spirit, Tokisaki Kurumi, was standing there.

"What……!"

"……"

As a result of hearing Kotori's voice, or perhaps noticing her presence even before Kotori, the other Spirits stood up with the faces on red alert.

However, Kurumi did not seem to panic even in the slightest after seeing the Spirits'

reaction. She only smiled merrily.

"Ara, ara, what's going on everyone?"

"……No, I was just a little bit surprised for you to initiate the conversation."

Kotori's nose uttered a 'hun' sound as she realigned her posture and answered back in a fearless tone.

Looking carefully, Kurumi was not wearing her Astral Dress. Instead, she was wearing a pretty monochrome coat.

As far as one could see, it did not look like a battle situation——but only as far as seen on the scope of the surface.

"So, Kurumi. What are you doing? Did you come looking for something?"

As Kotori crossed her arms and inquired, Kurumi clapped her hands as if recalling something.

"Ah yes, I came to go shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Right——I was thinking about the arrangement of materials for the chocolate I'd like to give Shidou-san."

"……!"

Kurumi's remarks caused a slight uproar among the Spirits.

But sure enough it still was met within expectations. The 14th had been chosen as the day of the decisive battle, set to be enriched by the special holiday called Valentine's Day.

At that moment, Kurumi noticed something while blinking her eyes.

"Perhaps, you've all also come to buy materials for chocolate?"

"……Well, looks like you also noticed."

"Ufufu, that's right. The goals for coming to a confectionary shop at this time are surely limited. Also, you can tell from a quick glance at the contents of your shopping basket——"

There, Kurumi took turns looking at everyone before abruptly stopping at Origami's hand, making a strange facial expression in return… well , it was no wonder right now considering what the girl was holding.

"……You're going to be making handmade chocolate?"

"……That's the plan for the time being."

For a moment, Kurumi looked like she was lost in her thoughts, with a question mark above her head. However, she soon regained her usual composure and elevated up her face while clearing her throat.

"Now then, there is a proposal I would like to prevail upon you to heed."

"Proposal……?"

Hearing Kurumi's words, Kotori let out a skeptical expression.

——About an hour had already passed.

"……What ah, is with this situation?"

Kotori, who had arrived at a room in the Spirit Mansion to make chocolate after leaving the store, uttered in small voice.

But that was only natural, anyhow——

"Ara, ara. So this is the place where you are living. Ufufu, is this not a wonderful place."

Behind Kotori, the Worst Spirit, Tokisaki Kurumi was muttering joyfully while looking at the spacious kitchen.

That's right. That was proposal from Kurumi——

(——I also want to start making chocolate as soon as possible after acquiring the ingredients. If everyone doesn't mind, can we work on it together?) Beyond just unexpected, it was an unreasonable request from that person.

Kurumi was indeed a Spirit, the target for both Ratatoskr to capture and offer asylum to. In any case, such an exchange might necessary to solve against feelings of precaution.

But in her case, the situation was clearly different than that of the other Spirits.

After all, she already knew about <Ratatoskr> and Shidou's goals and challenged him to a contest with preset demands. There was nothing wrong in suspecting another hidden motive in that action.

"……"

However, as Kotori turned over to gaze towards Kurumi.

Certainly, Kurumi was a dangerous Spirit. With a large reservoir of reiryoku, there was no way to win in a match of numbers against her. A moment of carelessness was impermissible against this opponent.

But for this reason, it could be described as a golden opportunity to gather information about her.

For the upcoming 14th, before the decisive battle between Kurumi and Shidou, Kotori wanted to know as much as possible about Kurumi. For that reason, she had no choice but to accept the proposal.

"……Kotori."

As Kotori was deep in thought, Reine spoke her name in a low voice.

"……For the time being, I will return to <Fraxinus>. This is a rare opportunity to monitor Kurumi's emotional value and favorability results as much as possible."

"Well, please. I'll do something to manage here."

"……Un, I'm depending on you; may fortune be in your favor."

After Reine finished speaking, she slowly raised her head and exited the room. When she saw Reine's back leave the room, Kurumi tilted her had as if intrigued by the mystery of the farewell.

"Ara, is Murasame-sensei going home?"

"Yes, it seems to have to do with an errand."

As Kotori tried to consciously deceive her, Kurumi gave out a 'huh……', narrowing her eyes as she watched Reine's figure disappear in that direction.

For a moment, Kotori thought she was aware of her lie——but it was a little different from that. Although it wasn't clear, within that gaze lingered a glimmer of suspicion.

"What's wrong? Was there something you wanted to talk to Reine about?"

"Ah, no, I don't think so."

When questioned by Kotori, Kurumi shook her head nonchalantly.

"——Moreover, we'll be starting soon."

And then, just as if to bring back the topic at hand, she pointed to the shopping bag marked with the confectionary store's logo on top of the cooking room table.

Right now, Kotori and the others weren't in one of the rooms that the Spirits' resided, but instead in a kitchen space set up on the first floor of the mansion.

Being a mansion designed to house the Spirits, there were various facilities prepared beside the living room. There was a fitness gym for health maintenance and a theater room for entertainment. The kitchen was only one of such facilities.

Of course, there was a kitchen in each room, but in the event of holidays like

Valentine's Day and Christmas, this large space was built in anticipation for the opportunity of several Spirits working together.

On the kitchen counter where the Spirits could work side by side together, there were various cooking utensils, regardless of eastern or western origin, that had been assembled.

There was even a large firepower gas stove normally used for professional businesses installed and readily available for use.

When the mansion was completed last year, a single look was enough to make Shidou completely frozen in place, just like a young boy staring at a new trumpet through a display window.

"Ufufu, it's been a long time since I made some sweets…… ara?"

As Kurumi cheerfully spread out the ingredients she had bought on the kitchen, her eyes became wide open as if noticing something.

The reason quickly became prevalent. The Spirits had gathered in a corner of the room, expressing a vigilant look.

"Mu…… What on earth are you thinking about, Kurumi?"

"I-If you open it, I can help……"

"Participating in war. Yuzuru will not remain silent."

Several people spoke as they turned their gaze to Kurumi. However, their exterior confidence hid behind a timid fright.

But that was only natural as well. The opponent was a Spirit that had declared her intention on eating Shidou. It was impossible for them not to be on alert.

However, that was within the range of Kurumi's expectations. She relaxed her mouth with a 'fufu' sound before continuing to speak with a louder voice.

"Ara, aren't you all going to start making it? Ufufu, then Shidou-san's heart will belong exclusively to me."

"What……!"

After hearing Kurumi's words, the Spirits all wrinkled their brows.

Such a simple provocation, but even for those aware (although it appeared that

there were a few who were truly oblivious) they could turn a deaf ear to those words. The Spirits angrily exhaled before slowly moving to the cooking station.

"How can I let you succeed……! I will protect Shidou! Ungunu!"

"I-I will also…… do my best!"

"Muku's Nushi-sama mustn't be allowed for thee to wantonly take."

After saying so, the Spirits started arranging the prepared ingredients on hand.

Looking at this sight, Kurumi cheerfully laughed from the bottom of her heart.

"Ufufu, I won't lose either."

Kurumi rolled up her sleeves, put on the apron hanging in the room, and washed her hands very careful y.

Everyone else also changed the style of the appearance to prepare for cooking before returning to the cooking station once again. Holding out their washed hands to dry above their chest level and in front of the table, the posture resembled a surgeon preparing for surgery.

"……."

"……."

"……Ummmuu."

However, the surgeon standing before the cooking station, no, the Spirits did not know in the least how to start the operation.

After remaining silent for a few seconds, Tohka gave a confused look to Kotori.

"Kotori, what should be done next? Umumu."

"Eh, ah, yes."

Kotori's eyes rounded wide like a circle for a second before she faintly nodded her head—— although they had already talked about the necessary ingredients, the specific production methods had not been explained in detail yet.

"Well, to say it briefly, you melt the piece of chocolate and then cool it in the refrigerator and decorate as you like."

"Oh, I understand! Ummuu."

"Say, Tohka, not just from the beginning, but a moment ago you were chewing on something?"

At that time, Natsumi spoke to Tohka with half-open eyes after narrowing her eyebrows.

Speaking of which, just now for some reason, Tohka's words sounded strangely unclear. As Kotori gazed in Tohka's direction, the reason soon became apparent.

Tohka had already opened the chocolate bag she had bought and her hands were already plucking out the contents to eat heartily.

"Hey…… that's not good, Tohka. If you eat that much, there wouldn't be enough left to give to Shidou."

"Muu? Ah……! Before I even noticed……!?"

As Kotori finished, Tohka gave out a stunned expression after noticing the movement of her hand.

"A-Ah, Kurumi…… what a sly attack…… ummmuu."

"……No, it's obviously different from that. Anyway you are still eating."

"Ufufu, it seems to be working. Changing it so that you want to eat even more~~~."

"Muu!? I-I can't stop……! Ummmuu."

"Kurumi, you shouldn't immediately heckle her afterwards!"

After Kotori shouted for a moment, she seized the chocolate bag from Tohka's hand, who was too exhausted to even breathe.

"Ha…… well it was good that we bought a little bit more for insurance. Everyone, let's get started then."

"Umu!"

As Kotori said while lowering her voice, Tohka vigorously nodded her head.

However, she slanted her head immediately afterwards.

"……Mu, Kotori. How can we melt this?"

"Eh? What are you talking about; you don't need to ask that. Chocolate……"

After speaking that far, Kotori suddenly choked on her words.

No, not just her words. For a few seconds, all movement from her ceased as her body became completely stationary. There was only the movement of sweat dripping down from her forehead very slowly.

"……Kotori-san?"

"What's wrong?"

"W-W-Wait just a moment."

Being spoken to by the Spirits who all bore puzzled expressions, Kotori was finally able to recover from her stiffness. While wiping the sweat from her forehead, she tried to recall the previous time where she had made chocolate with her mother.

However, the memories that were retrieved had begun with the chocolate already melted and poured into the mold. At that time, her mother said it was too dangerous for her to use the fire and had already melted chocolate.

She didn't think that the drawbacks of Reine returning to <Fraxinus> would appear in this form. Kotori pressed her hand against her forehead as she bitterly clenched her teeth Then, after seeing Kotori in such a defeated state, Kurumi softly snickered.

"Ara, Kotori-san. You don't know the way to temper it? I can teach it to you if you don't mind."

"……! H-How noisy. I understand how to do this little thing!"

Kotori breathed out indignantly as she proudly boasted.

But after that moment, a question filled her head.

——Tempering? What is this tempering thing? Is it melting chocolate? Tempering……tenpa?

TL note: Tenpa is a phrase referring to unnaturally curly hair.

"……."

Kotori covertly looked over at Natsumi's direction, surprised to see that her shoulders were shaking in surprise.

"……W-What are you doing?"

"No, it's nothing. ——Anyway, you'll first have melt the chocolate. The point is that you only have to dissolve it, so there's no need to think too hard about it.

As Kotori stretched out speaking her bluff, she took out a pot from the shelf and placed it on top of the stove. And then, she threw in a large lump of chocolate into the pot before igniting the stove. The fanning of the flames from the gas burner against the pot was comparable to those used in circulation by professional Chinese restaurants.

Ever so slowly, the chocolate lost is original shape as it melted down. Tohka and the others let out an 'Oh…' sound as if amazed by the sight.

"Amazing, Kotori, it's melting perfectly."

"Mun, it's splendid."

"Oh, not bad, Imouto-chan, as expected of Boy's little sister."

As everyone was praising her, Kotori remembered a faint uneasiness, but still puffed up in her chest in pride regardless.

"Y-Yes, for me it's just as easy as——"

"……Hey, is something burning?"

"Eh?"

After hearing what Natsumi said, Kotori rushed in to check.

"Hi i——"

As it turned out, the melted chocolate in the bottom of the pan had boiled and burned in the blink of an eye. Black smoke emerged from the pot as a burning smel lingered around the surroundings.

"I-It's a disaster! Water! Pour water on the chocolate!"

"O….. Ohhh."

"A-Alright, please take this……!"

Kotori quickly tossed the glass of water handed to her into the pot. Juuuuuuuu——! As that sound resounded, even more smoke emerged from the pot before finally simmering down.

"Ha…… ha……"

"I-I got too impatient……"

"Ne, ne, Imouto-chan, is making chocolate supposed to feel like this?"

"Ugu……"

After being asked by Nia, Kotori felt beads of sweat emerged from her forehead.

Inside the pot, the pitch-black liquid plunged below the leftover amount chocolate that didn't melt yet. At the very least, it would be impossible to call this delicious even after solidification.

"Ara, ara."

At that moment, Kotori's line of sight intersected with Kurumi's.

While accepting Kotori's gaze, Kurumi gave a gentle smile as if saying——'I can come help you anytime'.

"Ku……"

Kotori's face twisted in disappointment. Despite it being a fact that she wanted to ask for help, her pride wouldn't allow her to rely on Kurumi.

"……Ne, ne, Kaguya, Yuzuru, did you guys ever have a chocolate duel?"

Lowering her voice so Kurumi wouldn't hear, Kotori decided to ask the Yamai sisters. The two of them placed their hands on their chins.

"Genesis and I are incompatible. Destruction and annihilation are my origin."

"Translation. Unfortunately there has been no chocolate match, though there was a fast food eating contest."

"Is that so……"

As Kotori's shoulders drooped down in disappointment, Kaguya interjected with a 'but'.

"It's not like we are not without any knowledge in melting that jet-black lump."

"Agreement. I remember they were using boiling water in TV."

"Boiling water……"

As Kotori was listening to the two, her eyes suddenly wide awake.

At that time, she remembered that her mother had put boiling water into the pot. Indeed, with that there was no concern over the chocolate being burnt.

"That's it!"

Kotori then prepared another pot, placing water inside it before igniting the fire. Soon afterwards, the water began boiling as steam rose out from the pot.

"Good."

Kotori took the chocolate and threw it into the boiling water as it was. At that time, despite not knowing the reason, Natsumi gave out an 'ah……' sound as if noticing the misconception.

Placing the chocolate into the water too quickly caused the corners to dissolve into the hot water.

"It melted, it melted, no, we only have solidify it."

"Hmm…… honorable sister, this chocolate is beheld without semblance to what Muku agnises."

While carefully staring at the movement of Kotori's hands, Mukuro gave out an incredulous stare. But Kotori only gave an 'ahaha' laugh in return.

"Well, you would never have chocolate in this state unless it is handmade. But it'll become sturdy soon enough after putting it in a mold. Try sampling it if you're worried."

"Mun, very well."

"Kotori! Me too! I also want to sample it!"

Tohka's eyes were shining as she raised her hand to ask. Kotori said, "alright, alright," before taking out some of the melted chocolate on a plate to hand to the two of them.

At the same time, the two of them licked the chocolate.

However——

"……M-Mun……?"

"Kotori……? Somehow it feels the flavor is weak."

"Eh?"

Kotori wrinkled her brow as she tasted it herself.

After that, she made an expression similar to those two.

"Hey, what's this…… it's not even tasty in the slightest……"

"……No, well , that's because mixing it so suddenly with hot water caused it to become so strange……"

With half-open eyes, Natsumi replied back. Kotori's shoulders trembled as if trying to find an explanation.

"T-Then, how can one melt the chocolate? After all……"

While Kotori held against her head in distress, this time Miku gave out a bright expression with a puff as if she had thought up of something.

"Ah, Kotori-san, I thought up of a good method!"

"……"

Kotori gave a suspicious glance at Miku. Of course, if it was a good method, then she would want to learn by all means. But even so, Miku's cheerful expression seemed a bit too excessive.

"……What? Is it something like, 'hear me out, would you get angry if I said that you can harden the melted chocolate by licking it'?"

"Kya! How did you understand? As I thought, we must be communicating from the depths of our hearts!"

"Wait…… no, let me go!"

As Kotori pushed Miku's body back, she once again pressed against her head.

Her pride would never allow her to accept Kurumi's guidance. Looking for someone else who was skilled in cooking—— "……! Yes, Origami!"

Kotori raised her face and turned her eyes towards Origami's direction.

Accomplished in both the military and fine arts, Origami was perfectly competent in everything. If it were her, making chocolate should be one of her fortes.

But——

"What."

"……."

Through the previously unnoticed personal computer and 3D printer, Origami was printing a nude sculpture of herself. Kotori was left flabbergasted.

……Somehow, while carrying the chocolate computer image of herself, the object just now looked like something following Vienna Gashapon Gashapon. The image was unable to connect with the center of head.

TL Note: Gashapon is a toy vending slot in Japan "……Good luck."

"I will do my best."

As Kotori spoke with sweat dripping down, Origami nodded while giving off a serious expression.

For the third time, she was at a complete loss.

Perhaps due to not being able to bear seeing Kotori like this, Natsumi spoke out in a very polite voice.

"……Kotori."

"……What?"

"……No, I don't know if this matters and I can't take responsibility if we fail. Maybe you don't want to hear what I want to say in the first place——"

"No, so what do you want to say?"

After Kotori spoke, she knitted her brow. Natsumi replied while dodging her line of sight."

"……If it is a simpler way to make it, I understand."

"……Sensei!"

Kotori quickly clasped onto Natsumi's hands.

"Oooh……!"

"Natsumi-san, how amazing……!"

Then, each of the other Spirits sent out a look of respect to Natsumi. Surprised at this, Natsumi's shoulders trembled as she tried to remain calm under the flickering pairs of eyes.

"N-No, I don't want you guys to expect this much……"

"Sensei! What should be done first!?"

"……Well, first put the chopped up chocolate in the bowl and then add the hot water. Ah, the temperature should also be kept the same……"

As Natsumi spewed out the instructions in an awkward manner, the Spirits were listening intently as they began the production of handmade chocolate.

At that time——

"……?"

Kotori's eyebrows unexpectedly shuttered.

"——Ufufu, fufu."

Looking at the current state of the other Spirits, Kurumi let out an inexplicable degree of joyful laughter.

It wasn't ridicule designed for the weak that had challenged her. It was just as if she was smiling while cheerfully watching the stumped expressions of a younger sister.

"……No way."

Kotori slightly shrugged her shoulders as she picked up a bowl to put in the chocolate.

"Alright everyone, let's make a chocolate that won't lose to Kurumi!"

"Ooh!"

As if to correspond with Kotori's voice, the Spirits all raised their fists up into the air.

Chapter 4 - The Recent Sin

And so, the morning of February 14th finally dawned.

It was the day for lovers who celebrated the name of St. Valentine——the day of the decisive battle between Shidou and Kurumi.

"……"

Shidou washed himself in the bathroom more carefully than usual before walking out. While aligning his reflection in the mirror, he slapped his own cheeks to raise his fighting spirit with a *kiai* shout. Fine droplets of water made a mildly tasteful sound while scattering onto the mirror.

"——Alright."

Needless to say, he did not forget to wipe clean the droplets of water splashed onto the mirror. If ignored, they would leave a white stain after drying that would be difficult to sweep up.

The excessive behavior of common people…… or the primitive acts of a house-husband.

However, Shidou thought that this much wasn't good enough for himself.

The opponent was a difficult rival to beat: Tokisaki Kurumi. While Shidou had first encountered her a few months ago, so far she was the only Spirit he had failed to seal. She would not be an opponent who would be easily made bashful. Shidou would probably need to wash his face again.

But even so, Shidou did not intend to die today.

For this reason, he couldn't even let the small stains go. If he entrusted the cleaning to Kotori, she would definitely leave a scratch on the mirror by forcibly trying to rub the stain off.

Shidou thought that Kotori would likely fume furious if she ever heard that. While opening the door to the living room, he suddenly stopped his feet cold.

Kotori was standing at the end of the door, as if waiting for Shidou.

“Oh?!”

Although Shidou’s thoughts hadn’t been seen through, it was still very surprising to see Kotori’s sudden appearance.

Seeing such a reaction from Shidou, Kotori pouted her lips in dissatisfaction.

“Hey, hey, what is it.”

“No, sorry…… I was a little surprised just now.”

Kotori looked at Shidou’s face with a doubtful expression for a few seconds, but then said, “Well, it doesn’t matter,” and shrugged her shoulders.

She casually took out something hidden behind her hands.

“Take this.”

“Huh?”

Shidou stared with wide open eyes, looking back and forth between Kotori and the object in her hand. It was a small box decorated with a beautiful wrapping: black ribbons and red wrapping paper, which looked just like Kotori in her military uniform.

“Oh…… perhaps it’s chocolate?”

Hearing Shidou ask so, Kotori’s nose issued an ‘hmm’ noise, while her cheeks were slightly reddish as she adverted her eyes.

“……Just this once, although there’s nothing to be boast about receiving this from your little sister.”

“What’re you saying? Thank you, Kotori.”

Shidou smiled as he took the chocolate, while Kotori’s face became increasingly red as she turned around.

“Okay, okay, let’s compare this then, look.”

“Hmm?”

As Shidou tilted his head, Kotori gently raised her hand as she gestured towards the direction of the living room.

As if in rhythm with her command, there seemed to be five Spirits waiting in the living room, all of them gathering around Shidou while holding small boxes and bags in their hands.

From right to left, they were Yoshino, Natsumi, Mukuro, Miku, and Nia respectively.

“Wow, did everyone come? It’s still quite early today too.”

“Yes…… because I want to hand this to Shidou-san.”

“…….Well, I probably did nothing good, but for the time being……”

“Mun, prithee, Nushi-sama, attain receipt. It shan’t lose to that wench.”

“It’s fine yō~~because we didn’t put any strange things in.”

“Yes, yes, it’s something that is all natural.”

“Why does the second half of that sentence sound so terrifying!?”

Receiving a loud scream from Shidou, Nia and Miku both began laughing.

In any case, with chocolate continuously piled up in his hands, Shidou gave a wry smile as he thanked everyone.

“Haha…… thanks, everyone. It’s the first time after being born that I’ve received so much chocolate.”

“No…… you’re welcome.”

“Ne——ne—— please open it!”

“Oh, is it okay? Well then……”

In response to Miku’s urging, Shidou placed the received boxes and bags he received on the table and began opening the packages one by one.

Within the turn of the eye, there were various shaped chocolates like heart shaped, star shaped, and even truffles. One can notice from a glance that it was not a readily made product bought at a store.

“Oh, these are all handmade!?”

In response to Shidou’s question, the Spirits surely gave a proud nod.

“What’s the matter? Kotori, did you lose chocolate by placing it directly in the pot first rather than putting it in hot water first?”

“Thhhhhhhat kind of thing never happened!”

Kotori, while in an unabashed trembling state, turned her eyes to see a scene of the Spirits laughing merrily.

It appeared that she did something similar to that. Although Kotori was not entirely skilled at cooking, she would always be in a stubborn place as she did rough work.

Nonetheless, the workmanship of chocolate lined up before him was amazing coming from novices. Not only that, while being neatly lined up in front, the decoration also displayed its own very lovely characteristics.

By the way, Kotori’s chocolate had a very orthodox star shape, Yoshino’s was Yoshinon-shaped, Natsumi’s truffle-shaped, Mukuro’s had a wide variety of large and small star shapes, whereas Miku’s was patterned like a musical note, and Nia’s styled in a semi-circular silky milk chocolate with a strawberry protruding from the chocolate, making it look like a breast-shaped chocolate.

……Although there were a few embarrassing things put in, it would truly exhaust a man’s blessings to be able to receive so much chocolate. Shidou once again thanked everyone and tasted every chocolate piece by piece.

“Um, this is delicious! Haha, this would overwhelm even a professional.”

After hearing Shidou’s words, the Spirits all smiled.

In the middle of the group, Kotori displayed a relieved expression while shrugging her shoulders.

“If you like it, then more than anything else, you’ll have to work hard today.”

“Ah——that’s right.”

Shidou gave a vigorous nod and took another piece of chocolate into his mouth. The momentary rush of energy from the sugar produced a feeling that everyone was giving encouragement from behind him, filling every inch of his body with motivation.

Seeing Shidou in this state, Kotori could only shrug her shoulders with a wry smile.

“Looks like there wasn’t any need to worry. ——Ah, but you may not want to eat

too much for your own good, okay?”

“Huh?”

With Kotori’s words, Shidou dropped into cold sweat.

“No way, really what else could be added……”

“That’s not it! I wanted to say that there are a few people left in the school group, so it’s better if you didn’t eat too much!”

Kotori flicked Shidou’s forehead as she spoke.

After twenty minutes, Shidou got dressed and left home while being sent off by everyone present. Then, after turning around, he saw Tohka’s presence in front of the door.

“! Oh, Shidou! Good morning!”

After noticing him, Tohka, full of vitality, waved her hand merrily.

“Ah, good morning, Tohka. How long have you been waiting?”

“No, that’s not true! I got here just now!”

After saying that, Tohka gave out a snivel from her running nose. Looking carefully, it was noticeable that her nose was slightly red. Although, he didn’t fully understand what Tohka had meant by ‘just now’, it seemed as if she had been in a cold place for a while now.

However, it did seem Tohka didn’t care about that at aall. From her hands, she delivered a small paper bag containing a finely packaged small box straight to Shidou.

“Shidou! Happy Valentine’s day!”

And after saying that, she displayed a dazzling smile.

“Oh, hey.”

Having already received chocolate from Kotori and the others, he should have been prepared for such a gift. However, as a result of receiving it in a cheerful manner, Shidou’s face slightly redden as he took the gift.

“Thank you, Tohka.”

“Umu, I’m confident in it!”

Tohka nodded while fixing her sparkling eyes onto Shidou.

“Haha……”

Although it hinted at a little bit of immodest manners, it couldn’t be helped. Shidou opened the box in order to view its contents.

Inside, with a gentle aromatic fragrance, there were lots of truffle chocolates covered with yellow powder.

This was——

“Ah, perhaps this is soybean flour?

“Oh, that’s right!”

Tohka raised her hands with a clap. Indeed, it was a tiny soybean-flavored truffle. In a sense, it was a dish with a very Tohka-like feeling.

Shidou picked up a piece of chocolate and threw it into his mouth. The sweetness of the chocolate blended with the aroma of the soybean. Although he didn’t understand what instruction she had learned to make this, it was still a very noteworthy accomplishment.

“Un, delicious! Well done, Tohka——”

Before finishing, Shidou abruptly stopped his words.

Tohka was looking at Shidou with a very eager expression.

“……Do you also want to eat it, Tohka?”

“! N-No, it’s okay, this is a gift given to Shidou!”

“Well, there should be no problem for me to give it to Tohka then?”

As Shidou said that, Tohka opened her eyes like a full circle.

“Mu! That is…… that’s right.”

“That’s good, here.”

Shidou placed a piece of chocolate gently into Tohka’s mouth, causing her

muscles to arc back as she revealed a heart-struck expression.

“Ah…… Umu, delicious! Call the chef!”

“No, this is what you made.”

As Shidou responded with a wry smile, Tohka exposed an expression of surprise when she said “Hah! That’s right!”

Either way, it wasn’t as if they could eat all of them here. In order to enjoy the remainder for later, Shidou carefully placed the box back into the bag.

“Well, let’s go then. ——That’s saying if Kurumi isn’t here today.”

“Mu? Oh, that’s right.”

Tohka looked around the surroundings restlessly as she spoke. Meanwhile, Shidou was thinking as he placed his hand on his chin.

Today was the day of the decisive battle. The main event would be left for after school.

Shidou yelled “Okay!” as he clenched his fist with his raise his energy, and then headed off to the route to school with Tohka.

“……Hmm?”

After that, it took about twenty minutes.

Reaching the school entrance, Shidou stared with dumbfounded eyes.

That was because the Yamai sisters were standing in front of the left and right sides of the gate, like *Kongourikishi* waiting for them.

“Kaguya and Yuzuru? What are you doing in a place like this……”

“You’ve arrived, Shidou! Kuku, my golden crucifix arises here!”

“Presentation. I was waiting, please accept this.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru quickly obstructed Shidou’s words by handing over a box. The students who were walking around seemed to have immediately recognized the meaning of this action from today’s date. Faced with such a dignified and generous way of giving chocolate, there was sporadic applause coming from the surroundings.

“Oh, oh…… thank you. But there’s no need to give it here.”

“Kuku, what did you say? By going to the same school, we would be fools to let go of this advantage.”

“Assent. By showing this in front of everyone, there is also a point of deterrence against enemies.”

The Yamai Sisters were full of self-confidence as they finished speaking, turning their bodies around just like a tornado.

“The purpose has been achieved! Farewell!”

“Commentary. Although, I wanted to show off, it was embarrassing to hand it in front of everyone after all, so I want to leave as soon as possible. That’s what Kaguya said.”

“I have said no such thing!?”

Kaguya raised a screaming voice as she left to chase after Yuzuru, who ran earlier to escape into the school building.

Incidentally, after confirming, Kaguya’s chocolate was cross-shaped and decorated with gold leaves. Meanwhile Kaguya’s chocolate was decorated with *Alasan* confectionary beads that gave it a brilliant silver hue.

“As usual, those two resemble a passing storm……”

Shidou felt a drop of sweat fall down as he spoke, and then he brought his newly received chocolate into the school building.

But——after entering the classroom, Shidou felt his eyes once again stare in open bafflement.

“What……”

However, Shidou’s reaction was a matter of course. Everyone would display a similar reaction if a statue of an Angel appeared on top of their desks.

Upon a closer inspection, he found that the statue was entirely made out of chocolate.

Seeing such exquisite craftsmanship skills, Shidou inadvertently felt perspiration from his forehead.

Despite having said that, the culprit was obvious.

"……Origami."

"What."

As Shidou called that name frantically, there was an immediate reply, since the culprit was sitting in the seat left of him.

Yes, the face of the statute, from whichever point of view, looked identical to Origami.

"What is that…… what, that's…… amazing. Thank you"

"I'm glad."

As a result of not being able to find the words to speak after being given a straightforward impression, Origami slowly loosened her mouth while blushing.

"But I cannot eat it right now, so it'd be appreciated if I could save it…"

"I made a blunder."

As Origami finished, she took out a plastic cover to wrap around the chocolate. In less than a minute, the chocolate was packaged by the beautiful girl's hand.

"Here, no problem."

"T-Thanks…… as expected of you."

Shidou spoke with a wry smile as he placed the bag with the chocolate from Kaguya on the desk.

"……Hmm?"

Suddenly, he noticed a whisper from the end of the classroom.

"……bullshit, bullshit, bullshit, bullshit——"

"Die die die die die die"

"Bomb…… material…… how to make……"

Yes, after seeing the things in Shidou's hands, the boys in the classroom issued dark feelings of resentment.

"……"

Shidou's face made a powerless twitch. Although the mood was very complicated, it wasn't as if it was impossible to understand their feelings.

Just like he had said to Kotori and the others this morning, it was the first time he had received so much chocolate in his life. Until last year, he had only gotten chocolate from his mother and Kotori.

Well, his friend Hiroto Tonomachi had said, "Fuffuffu…… he had bought all of the limited edition chocolate from the neighborhood store so that no one could send chocolate……"

Although he could buy high quality chocolate for himself, one couldn't count on that.

Incidentally, just as Tonomachi mentioned that, the other boys began to stare at Shidou with faces filled with anger and grief.

"Gentlemen…… I will now preform the ceremony."

Suddenly, at the other end of the classroom, Tonomachi was about to open a box in his hand.

Inside there was a chocolate doll with the name 'Itsuka' written in white chocolate.

As Tonomachi slowly opened the box, the boys began to dance in a strange ritual that emitted a 'dondokodokodokodondokodokodoko……' sound in rhythm to a drum.

"Chowatsu!"

Just as that bizarre voice reached its climax, Tonomachi took out a large nail from his pocket and struck the chest of the doll written with 'Itsuka' as he raised his voice in a strange manner.

A crack entered the body of chocolate, causing the 'Itsuka' to fall apart.

Then, the boys who were scrambling around rushed to the chocolate fragments.

"Hyahhā! Itsuka fell apart!"

"Delicious! Delicious, ah!"

“I want to… eat Itsuka…… in order to gain Itsuka’s power.”

“……”

While watching this strange scene from the end of the world, Shidou could only wipe the sweat dripping from his cheek.

Ordinarily, these guys wouldn’t be so ridiculous…… but sure enough, Valentine’s day had a special presence for boys as well.

Suddenly, as a result of not being able to see the boys reach this way, three girls stood up together with a sigh.

The class’ three specialty maidens, Yamabuki Ai, Hazakura Mai, and Fujibakama Mii—— collectively known as the Ai Mai Mii trio.

“Really, how are boys so helpless……”

“Hey, hey, you all come here——”

“Come–come–”

After speaking, Ai, Mai, and Mii took out a container from a plastic bag. Packed inside, obligatory chocolate scattered around and filling the container to the brim was visibly seen.

So, the boys who were clustered at the sacrificial altar raised their faces at a tremendous speed after catching the scent of chocolate in the air.

While still scattered around, there were roughly thirty pieces of chocolate.

However, there was not even a single one that had touched the ground.

“Thank you…… thank you……”

“To receive chocolate from girls…… such a sweet fragrance……”

“Itsuka’s poison…… has been purified……”

From the boys in the group, the dark fog surrounding them dissipated (or so it would seem).

At that time, nobody knew that a member of the art department who was deeply moved by this act would later draw the masterpiece ‘The Goddesses of Freedom spreading Chocolate to the masses’.

“Mu, what was that? So noisy.”

“……Well, just leave them be.”

Then——

“……!”

Suddenly, the Spirits all looked at the same direction together.

Shidou’s line of sight was also affected by that direction as his shoulders gently trembled.

Kurumi was standing at the end of that line of sight. The moment their eyes meet, she gave him a sweet smile.

“Ufufu, good morning, Shidou-san. It’s really lively this early in the morning.

“Oh…… Good morning, Kurumi.”

Shidou returned back the greeting, but couldn’t help but give a ‘guu’ sound from a cold lump stuck in his throat.

But that was only natural, as Kurumi was the one who designated the plan for today.

Yesterday, as well as the day before yesterday, Shidou and Kurumi launched a fierce offensive and defensive battle.

But the circumstances begged to differ today due to the timeframe occurring after school. As a result, it would be a situation with just the two of them alone without the presence of the other Spirits. Perhaps, Kurumi would come in seriousness to win him over.

“……”

Shidou’s throat felt a bit thirsty from the tension. Kurumi, who took notice of this, lifted the corners of her lips into a smile.

“Fufu, it’s no good to be anxious, Shidou-san.”

Kurumi walked forward and spoked while affixing her lips close to Shidou’s ear.

“Happy things should be——saved for later enjoyment.”

"……~Tsu."

Inadvertently, due to the sound resounding in his eardrum, his body could help but shiver a bit.

However, in order for Kurumi to not notice this trembling, Shidou decided to endure it as he cracked a smile.

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it. ——You can rest assured that your room in the Spirit mansion's already prepared."

"Ara, ara."

Kurumi returned the smile at the same time as the school bell rang.

◇◇◇

"Kihihihi!"

"Kihihihi!"

"Hehehe!"

"Hehehe!"

"Now, now, what time is the next *schedule*?"

"It's still an hour from now."

"Ara, ara."

"Really makes one anxious."

"How can they not be tired of playing around?"

"Kihihi, hiki!"

"That's right."

"Right, those girls for example, that is."

“At best it should be something akin to an event happening only a few times.”

“Right, right, and.”

“Yes, yes, those girls must have a reason for their actions.”

“There’s no way to blame them at this point.”

“Of course, we also have a reason for our actions.”

“And then, there’s no way to avoid colliding with each other.”

“We won’t be merciful, though.”

“Alright, alright, so then next.”

“We should head out now.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Thank you.”

“Please, drop down to dearest death.”

“Please, lead to have a meaningful demise.”

“For *me*.”

“For *me*.”

“For *me*.”

“——For Shidou-san.”

◇◇◇

——Today, time passed by at a fast pace.

Needless to say, the hands of the clock turned at a rapid pace. While he thought of the events that would transpire after school, classes concluded.

While listening to the chime signaling the end of class, Shidou thought of something.

However, no one could blame Shidou.

After all, today's date was with the Worst Spirit, Kurumi.

Although her appearance was that of a seductive girl, her true identity was——
"……Let it be."

Thinking about such a thing, Shidou closed his lips as if to remember.

Kurumi was surely a Spirit with a mighty power. It would be a lie to say he wasn't terrified of her.

However, Shidou had to make her fall in love today. How could a man be running away, terrified to open her heart?

——Fears, panic; these feeling must be thrown away.

Simply faced with the date was enough to escalate the pulse of his heartbeat to a violent pace, as an exhilarating feeling of tension permeated through the air.

In order to regain his fighting spirit, Shidou patted down his cheeks with the palm of his hand.

『Apparently, there's nothing for me to add.』

As if to match the time Shidou found his resolve, the intercom worn on his right ear echoed with Kotori's voice.

In order to support Shidou, <Fraxinus>, where Kotori and the crew were waiting, was already flying above Raizen High School. Several autonomous cameras were sent into the classroom to observe Kurumi's actions.

Determined, Shidou slowly got up from his chair.

At that moment, he heard a small voice from the seat next to him.

"Shidou……"

Shidou turned around and saw that Tohka was sending off an uneasy look filled with concern.

"Tohka……"

While giving a smile, Shidou took out a lunch box from his bag——it was the same one Tohka had given him this morning.

Then, in an action surprising Tohka, Shidou opened the lunch box and used his thumb to throw a soy truffle into his mouth.

“Un, delicious——now I feel like I have the strength of a hundred people.”

“Oh……!”

Tohka opened her eyes wide as she waved her hand merrily.

Then at the same time, from the side opposite of Tohka——a strange glance was felt from the left-hand side.

“Shidou, eating my chocolate is worth the strength of a thousand people.”

Origami remained expressionless, but spoke with an unusual intensity.

However, Origami’s chocolate was a delicate one-sixth model of Origami herself. Truly, it would be a terrible spectacle to take out and causally eat like Tohka’s. While giving a wry smile and scratching his face, Shidou turned his body to Origami.

“I’ll eat Origami’s later——after sealing Kurumi’s *reiryoku*.”

“……”

Nodding to Shidou’s words, Origami seemed to have been persuaded.

Shidou stared at the two of them alternatively, and then spoke with words brimming with his resolve.

“I’m heading out now.”

“Umu……!”

“Good luck.”

Giving a shout of confirmation to the two of them, Shidou advanced his footsteps forward, not loosening his pace until he was in front of Kurumi.

“Yo, Kurumi.”

“Ara, Shidou-san, how may I help you?”

Perhaps, even after being the one to specify the day of the decisive battle, Kurumi had feigned nescience in order to speak in a joking manner.

Shidou took in a gentle breath and, as if adapting to that playful tone, stretched out his hand.

“After this, can I invite you on a date?”

“Ara, ara.”

Kurumi deliberately gave a surprised expression before slowly relaxing her cheeks.

“If you are okay with me, I would be glad to.”

Then, with the elegance of a daughter from a noble family, Kurumi took Shidou’s hand in order to raise herself up.

From the eyes of a third party, the exchange came as no doubt as a lady accepting a man’s invitation. In fact, after witnessing this scene, the other students began to spread gossip.

However, the reactions of Tohka and Origami were a little bit different from everyone else.

Their eyes teemed with tension, but it also showed their trust in Shidou as they watched him head out the door.

Because they knew——despite the dainty language used, for Shidou and Kurumi, it was the beacon heralding the outbreak of war between them.

“Well, let’s head out.”

“Ah, alright.”

Shidou nodded in agreement as he adjusted his uniform and left the classroom with Kurumi.

On the way, when they passed the neighboring classroom, Kaguya and Yuzuru came out to give him a thumbs up. Shidou returned the gesture as he walked into the corridor.

Although the students were bothered by this strange sight, their ruffled murmurs were not picked up by Shidou’s ear.

There was no point in worrying about his reputation in the class any longer. In this year alone, Shidou had been given disgraceful nicknames like ‘transfer student hunter’, ‘speed of light Itsuka’, and ‘the man who piled up virtue in a previous life that has now overclocked to the present’. Right now, if one or two more scandals were made, the formless basis for these rumors would be like driving more nails into a straw doll that had already been pin-cushioned.

『——Shidou.』

As Shidou was thinking about such a thing while walking, Kotori’s voice was suddenly heard from the intercom.

『I’ve got the options. Let’s decide where to go before leaving school.』

While also observing Kurumi and Shidou walking, three choices were being displayed on the main monitor of the aerial warship <Fraxinus>.

1. Home
2. Karaoke
3. Internet Café

The options for a course of action were charted by a Realizer manifestation device that was indicating Kurumi’s current mood and mental state in relation to her feelings towards Shidou.

“All crew, decide!”

As Kotori issued the order, all of the crew members on the lower deck began to operate their consoles at once.

After a few minutes, the monitor displayed the statistical results.

Although it was by a narrow margin, ② was the one that had gathered the most votes. Kotori stroked her chin.

“Well, it is reasonable…… but Maria, aren’t today’s choices somewhat biased?”

As Kotori finished, the characters MARIA appeared on a screen as a voice was heard from a speaker set on the bridge.

<Fraxinus>’s management AI, also known as Maria.

“As I have said before, the options are automatically generated based on various

data on the Spirit rather than created by me out of thin air. However, if I dare express my opinion, should it not be considered the wining move for the match?”

“Match?”

“Yes, the adversary is Tokisaki Kurumi; she is not an opponent with which one could afford to be negligent. I believe that we should be prepared for each choice to bear its own risk, so we ought to instead commence with a swift attack immediately.”

“Swift attack……?”

“To put it bluntly, we should lock the two of them in a room so they cannot be intruded upon.”

“……S-So that’s it……”

Kotori’s eyebrows twitched as her voice resonated an unsteady echo. But she immediately switched her thought process by bringing the microphone close to her mouth.

“W-Well anyway, Shidou, choose ②——”

“No——wait a moment.”

But just as Kotori was moving closer to the microphone to give the instructions to Shidou via intercom, the man himself suddenly responded so in the center of the monitor screen.

While changing their shoes near the entrance of the school, Shidou raised his voice to block out the instructions coming from <Fraxinus>.

Since Kurumi was also changing her shoes there, he had to do so in such a loud voice to prevent the possibility of their conversation being overheard. After quickly glancing aside to Kurumi’s direction, Shidou placed his hand on the intercom.

“What’s the matter? Is there something wrong?”

As Kotori asked in a suspicious manner, Shidou gently shook his head in repudiation before continuing to speak.

“——I’ve already decided where to go.”

“What?”

Kotori let out an astonished voice. Then, another voice other than Kotori's resounded in his ears. A girl's voice that resembled a clear silver bell: the <Fraxinus> AI, Maria.

"In other words, does that mean you do not believe in my performance?"

"No, it's not like that……"

Shidou struggled to answer while making a troubled faced. Then, a few minutes later, he heard a laughter-like breathing from Maria.

"Just kidding——We are only at most the support. If there is a firm will , a man should be able to implement it."

"Maria……"

After Shidou had said that name, Maria continued to make an inquiry.

"How about it, Commander?"

Usually, Maria would just call her *Kotori*, but it seemed she had intentionally used a more formal title this time to strengthen her argument.

After a momentary pause, Kotori heaved out a heavy sigh.

"Really, if I were to say it's no good, then I would be called an obstinate person."

So, after the hearing the sound of hair being rustled, an 'alright' was heard being transmitted back.

"There is no doubt that Shidou is the world's best specialist in Spirits. If you say so, then I'llrecognize it as well ——just as Maria stated, we're responsible for supporting you. Do as you like. If it turns out to be a miserable failure, then that's when our work begins."

"Ah…… thank you, Kotori, Maria."

Just as Shidou gave that acknowledgment, Kurumi came back with her shoes already changed.

"I've kept you waiting, Shidou-san."

"No, then shall we go?"

"Eh, by the way——"

While speaking, Kurumi gently placed her finger on his lips.

“I have somewhere I would like to go to.”

“…..!”

In response to Kurumi’s words, Shidou quickly furrowed his brows. Immediately from the intercom, Kotori’s voice could be heard giving an ‘ah cha’ sound.

“It looks like there’s a schedule conflict. If we could have taken the lead it would have been great, but if that is too difficult to influence, then the priority should be achieving Kurumi’s aspirations first.”

“Er……”

However, Shidou wasn’t very nervous.

Why was it——he didn’t understand why, but somehow it felt that Kurumi’s train of thought was aligning with his own plans.

“Actually, I also have a place I’d like to go——probably it’s the same place as yours.”

“Ara, ara.”

Kurumi gave a smile as if amused by Shidou’s words, laughing while grabbing hold of his hand.

“How interesting, so let’s head to that answer together——please take me to the place you thought of, Shidou-san.”

“Ah, leave it to me.”

For a moment, Shidou felt a sudden chill from the cold touch of Kurumi’s hand, but somehow he managed to avoid having his trembling noticed as he grasped onto her hand.

Then, the two of them slowly walked towards the direction of the station.

——After several minutes, with brief conversations made between Shidou and Kotori, the two of them finally exited from Tenguu Station.

“Here……”

The two of them entered inside the building, stopping by in front of a certain shop

just as Kotori's voice was heard in the intercom.

Kotori also probably noticed. Here was——a lingerie shop which Shidou and Kurumi had visited before during a previous date.

"Well…… is this the place that Shidou-san wanted to come?"

Kurumi started from the shop window, her mouth exposing a smile as Shidou nodded his head.

"Ah, yes."

"Ufufu…… Is that so? Shidou-san wants to see me in my underwear that much."

"……Well, that's not it, no, that's it, but it's not like that……"

In the face of such a teasing response from Kurumi, Shidou could not help but become so incoherent. Seeing Shidou in such a state, Kurumi let out a huff of laughter.

After that, Kurumi looked at the shop again before speaking.

"——That's the correct answer."

"Eh?"

"The place that I wanted to come——accurately speaking, here is no mistake. Ufufu, I remember *me* and Shidou-san coming here. I'm so happy."

After speaking so, Kurumi exposed a smile.

That's right, the Kurumi standing right here now and the *Kurumi* that went to this shop with Shidou in the past were both the same person and not the same person.

Last year in June, the *Kurumi* that had approached Shidou and gone on a date with him was a clone born from Kurumi's <Zafkiel>.

"I've been thinking about it ever since that day. I wonder what *I* felt while visiting here with Shidou-san——what in the world *I* was thinking before having her heart snatched away by Shidou-san."

"……"

In the midst of Kurumi's words, Shidou fell silent.

At that time, *Kurumi* had walked and laughed together with him on the street, but the *Kurumi* who had reached out for his hand on the school rooftop now no longer existed.

“Kurumi, you——”

Shidou opened his mouth, but stopped not a moment later.

Since the words spoken by Kurumi’s face seemed to emit a somewhat melancholic and lonely expression.

“Although she existed as an immature child, that was *me* as well.”

“……”

Shidou plunged into silence once again, but after a few seconds, he took in a gentle sigh.

Then, Shidou clenched in more vigor into the hand that was holding onto Kurumi’s.

“……? Shidou-san?”

“Great, of course that’s truly the answer to the date of that time.”

“Eh?”

Kurumi seemed shocked at Shidou’s words while turning over her eyes. Meanwhile, Shidou raised his mouth as he looked back.

“Although it was a clone, I am a man who once caught *Tokisaki Kurumi.* Just like that, let me follow the same route as that time. ——After today is over, you’ll only be thinking about me.”

“Haha.”

With a dumfounded expression in her eyes, Kurumi loosened her mouth with a laugh.

Then, she returned the favor by clenching back with even more force onto the grip she was using to hold onto Shidou’s hand.

“I’m looking forward to it. Ufufu, Shidou-san, can you capture me?”

The two of them smiled at each other as they entered the shop side by side.

This was a lingerie shop. Naturally, there was an array of female undergarments on display in the store. It looked like a flower garden with numerous multicolored flowers in bloom.

Through such flowers, Kurumi walked gracefully in rhythm step by step, just like a butterfly.

Glossy black hair, a black coat, and a single red eye, it looked like a lovely butterfly with jet-black wings.

"——Hey, Shidou-san, of course you'll select underwear for me, won't you?"

Kurumi turned her head over as she flashed a mischievous smile. Seeing such a lovely appearance was even a little dangerous for Shidou, as he felt his heartbeat speed up.

"……That, ah, of course."

"Ufufu, how fun. Come——which one do you think looks good?"

Kurumi jokingly tilted her head as she asked.

Behind her were countless *flowers*, it was like Kurumi was pointing numerous multicolored weapons at him.

At that time, a voice came from the earpiece asking a question.

"——Need an option, Shidou?"

"……No, please let me think about it here."

With a whisper, Shidou stepped forward without fear as he looked at the underwear that was lined up on display in the store.

However, it would be difficult to say that choosing a sexy see-through underwear would be a good move. That is to say, in a match where the first to fall in love lost, allowing Kurumi to equip such a destructive outfit may cause irreversible damage to him.

A few minutes later, he found something suitable for Kurumi, an undergarment that was exotic but not too erotic. Shidou called out to Kurumi.

"Kurumi, how about this?"

"Ara, ara, it's pretty cute, I thought that Shidou-san would definitely choose that

kind of underwear.”

While speaking, Kurumi pointed to the sensational underwear worn by a mannequin. Shidou felt a glimmer of sweat fall down his cheek.

“N-N-No, I’m saying that this underwear might be unexpectedly suitable for you, right?”

“Ufufu, is that it? If Shidou-san says so, I’ll try it.”

With a blissful expression, Kurumi took the outfit Shidou had selected to the changing room.

Then, after a few minutes.

With a swish sound, the curtain opened to reveal Kurumi’s figure in underwear.

“——!”

Looking at such a figure, Shidou unexpectedly choked on his own breath.

He cursed himself for his shallowness and carelessness. Surely, in consideration to the potential damage to himself, Shidou chose a design with a relative low degree of exposure.

However, he had forgotten that the value of underwear was not only determined by exposure level.

——Predecessors had said, “Victory lies not in the erotic underwear, but rather in pure white underwear.”

As a result, lingerie that should have been relatively modest, produced synergistic effects beyond expectations by enrobing Kurumi with the finest of materials.

Bewitchingly pure, lovely while also being a polished beauty. In that gap, Shidou could only remain speechless for a while.

“——Shidou-san?”

“Eh…… ah.”

Hearing his name being called, Shidou was brought back to reality.

“How is it? Does it become me?”

“Ah…… it’s very suitable, suitable to the point of being dangerous.

After Shidou finished speaking, Kurumi looked surprised for an instant as her cheeks were slightly blushing.

“Ufufu, in that case, does that mean I caught Shidou-san?”

“Hey…… what’s that about?”

In response to Kurumi’s words, Shidou shrugged his shoulders while speaking. In actuality, he was on the verge of pretending to be brave, but there was nothing else he could say.

He didn’t know if the real intentions behind his words were noticed, but Kurumi suddenly revealed a smiling expression.

“Well, let’s get this then——Shidou-san.”

While speaking, Kurumi beckoned him over. Shidou slowly walked towards her while inclining his hand downwards.

“Take this…..”

“Hmm……?”

Kurumi handed something over to him that was rolled up by a black cloth. Standing next to the mystery, Shidou wrinkled his eyebrow in curiosity.

“What is this…… ah, this——!”

Unraveling the cloth with both hands——Shidou felt a sudden spasm come from his diaphragm.

However, that was only natural. What just got handed over to him was the underwear that Kurumi had just worn, with a faint residue of warm temperature still remaining from being in contact with her body.

“Ufufu, since it’s a rare occasion, today I’ll be wearing the underwear that Shidou-san picked for me. ——Please take care of that.”

“O-Oh……?”

Despite not knowing what to say, Shidou still felt obligated to reply while his face turned red.

◇◇◇

“Hmm……”

About two hours had elapsed since the start of the date.

While observing the situation between Kurumi and Shidou in <Fraxinus>’s bridge, Kotori stirred around the Chupa-Chups in her mouth.

On the monitor, the two of them had left the lingerie shop and were walking side by side on the street towards their next destination.

Shidou’s hand was firmly holding onto Kurumi’s. It didn’t seem like Kurumi was annoyed at it.

Actually, although her reaction width was narrow, Kurumi’s relationship values were by no means denoted as bad.

“……How strange.”

Reine spoke while placing her hand on her chin. She was probably thinking the same thing.

Giving out a slight groan, Kotori let out an ‘ah’ sound as she looked at the numerical value at the end of the screen.

There, it was denoting Kurumi’s mental state, however—— “……Clearly, there’s a difference in Kurumi’s values during peacetime. It’s as if she’s under extreme stress. However, this reaction is not caused by the date with Shin. This is……”

“……”

Hearing Reine’s words, Kotori made a sullen face.

The Spirits being under stress was not a desirable condition for Kotori.

However, reflected on the screen, Kurumi's expression seemed joyful. Yet, this did not diminish the feeling from the value by any means. On the contrary, there was a scent of an unidentifiable, dangerous atmosphere.

"——Anyway, everyone, don't be careless."

"Roger that!"

As Kotori spoke, the crew responded together in unison.

◇

By ten o'clock, Shidou and Kurumi were sitting side by side on the park bench.

Ever since they had departed from the lingerie shop, they went on towards the following route.

Walking beside each other on the same path, eating at the same store——and then finally coming here.

As a dark curtain descended upon the sky, only enough moonlight and sporadic streetlights scattered illuminance. Already, not even the shadows of a person remained in the vicinity, creating the illusion that only two people were left behind in the world.

In the middle of February, the temperature after sunset was so cold that one could exhale a white mist with every breath. Originally, it wasn't a climate where one could stay out for long.

However, the park was an indispensable part for the date between Shidou and Kurumi.

"Shidou-san, do you remember? This place."

"Ah…… I do, though I don't want to think about it."

Shidou answered with a slight sigh. That's right, since this was the place where Shidou had seen for the first time Kurumi's violent crime and also her very corpse.

"Hehe."

Kurumi laughed vaguely without replying back to Shidou and then, as if remembering something, took out a lovely box from a bag.

"Come now, I'd almost forgotten——Shidou-san, Happy Valentine's Day."

As Kurumi was saying that, she handed the box over to Shidou.

Shidou took the gift with a wry smile.

“Thank you…… say, you almost forgot.”

“Um, that’s because——”

Kurumi breathlessly exhaled. While slowly turning over to lean on him, a challengeable weight was placed on Shidou’s shoulders. Her beautiful black hair tickled his cheeks.

“About that…… today was so much fun. That’s why it’s safe to say that it’s the best in my memory.”

“Kurumi……”

Shidou softly spoke, gently smiling while taking a small parcel from his bag.

“Well , this is from me, Happy Valentine’s Day, Kurumi.”

“Ara, ara.”

Shidou handed over a package, greatly surprising Kurumi in the process.

“Shidou-san…… although before I’ve thought it was nothing, after all only girls ——”

“That can’t be it!? Look, the reverse giving of chocolate is popular all the time. There are no rules that say boys can’t give chocolates to girls, right?”

As he raised his voice to refute Kurumi’s words, Kurumi laughed to show her amusement.

“Ufufu, that’s right, it’s just as you said. ——May I open it?”

“Ah, of course.”

After nodding to each other, the two of them opened each other’s boxes.

Shidou whipped up dark chocolate coated with a sauce made from honey and orange peels.

He thought that the dark color and faint bitter taste would seem to suit Kurumi somehow.

On the other hand, Kurumi's box was filled with various bite-sized chocolates of different designs and shapes.

Even though they were different—— it did not mean that no sense of unity occurred at all.

There were chocolates in the shape of cats, the same type that Shidou had made as a gift a few days ago.

"Oh, isn't this cute."

"Shidou-san's chocolates look delicious."

While talking to each other, the two of them unconsciously took the chocolate from the box and threw it into their mouths.

Both of them felt their cheeks loosening as their line of sight intersected.

"Haha, this is delicious, this flavor…… is it hazelnut?"

"Ah, as expected of Shidou-san. Mmm… this is also so delicious."

"……"

"……"

It wasn't as if there was nothing more to say.

Rather, it was just a feeling of wanting to fix one's eyes upon the other's.

"……"

Shidou gently pulled his shoulder to turn his hand closer so that he could lovingly stroke Kurumi's head.

Kurumi did not resist. But rather, it seemed as though she was looking forward to such an act as she brought herself closer.

If any unknown bystanders saw them now, they would look exactly like couple behaving intimately. In fact, it was the perfect position to easily lift up her chin and kiss her.

However——

"……Not bad, it's not bad alright."

Kotori's voice was heard from the intercom, even after this situation, it wasn't difficult to imagine the facial expression she was making from the sound alone.

That must mean that even if they kissed now, there was no way to completely seal her *reiryoku*.

As if to complement Kotori's words, Shidou also heard Reine's voice.

"……Kurumi isn't lying. I would guess that she really did enjoy today's date with you, Shin.

Even though it could be said that she has a good impression of you, she still hasn't opened her heart."

However, Reine continued on.

"In the depths of her heart, there appears to be a huge barrier. Determination……

resignation…… something like that. Kurumi has placed a huge shackle on herself that has made it impossible in practice to sever and for her to be happy. It will be impossible to seal her power unless you remove the cause of this."

"……"

——Huge shackles.

In a silent manner, while still gently stroking Kurumi's head, his hearts was recollecting those words in sweeping deliberation.

At the same time, Shidou's mind recalled what Nia and Origami had said.

(——Somehow, it seemed that there was something that she wanted to investigate through my <Rasiel>.)

(——The First Spirit, all in order to kill that person.) (30 years ago, at that time in order to prevent the existence of that Spirit from ever happening.) Yes, one could think that the matter was deeply rooted in that.

Kurumi wanted to use the Twelfth Bullet <Yud Bet> to travel back to 30 years in the past for the motive of erasing the First Spirit.

Even if she had to sacrifice everything; even if it meant piling up an accumulation of ten thousand corpses as a means of achieving that goal.

In that regard, Shidou still knew nothing.

"……Hey, Kurumi."

So, Shidou opened his mouth.

Indeed, not winning this match meant dying, but it wasn't also only for that reason as well.

Now more than ever, for this girl who was relying solely on herself, he wanted to understand her desires, thoughts, and resolve.

"Yes, Shidou-san."

"Can you tell us why you're trying to defeat the First Spirit?"

"……"

The moment Shidou spoke that subject, Kurumi's expression immediately tensed up.

However, after a long sigh that gave a hint of grief, Kurumi uttered her reply.

"Did you hear that from Nia-san? She's really a chatty person."

Kurumi stood up, taking a few steps away from the bench before turning back towards Shidou.

Under the night sky, the streetlights were like a spotlight illuminating Kurumi.

Then, as if it was a scene in a theater.

"Shidou-san, are you prepared to know? Everything——about me."

In the darkness of the night, the girl's eyes formulated a piercing gaze at him.

While the right eye was red like blood, the left eye was engraved with a golden timepiece inducing a clinking sound in conjunction with time.

"……"

For a moment, Shidou thought what he had seen was being produced by a hallucination of his mind, inadvertently causing him to swallow a sigh of relief.

However, he could not retreat here. Shidou controlled his cold and trembling hands as he nodded vigorously nodded towards Kurumi.

“——Ah, that’s my intention.”

“——Is that right.”

Kurumi quietly spoke as she elegantly raised her left hand.

At that moment, while entrenched on the ground, Kurumi’s shadow distorted in shape as a pistol of ancient design then flew out and gently landed on Kurumi’s hands.

It was the pistol that served as the hour hand for the Angel <Zafkiel>.

“Wha……”

While Shidou was suddenly surprised, Kurumi aligned the muzzle and pulled the trigger without hesitation. *Bang*, *bang*; a dry sound echoed a few times in the neighborhood.

“……!? This is——”

“The screen has been cut off!”

“The autonomous cameras seem to be destroyed!”

“Eh……?”

Hearing the <Fraxinus> crew’s shouts from within his eardrum, Shidou instinctively raised his brow. However, Kurumi was not finished. She took a step forward, a step approaching Shidou, stretching out her hand as if to touch his cheek.

The next moment, the voices from Fraxinus too had disappeared from his ear—— Kurumi had used her fingers to pinch away the intercom.

“……!”

While Shidou was watching with a stunned expression, Kurumi pressed her fingers together, crushing the intercom. A spark scattered with beeping electronic noise as a faint amount of smoke arose from her white fingertip.

In terms of time, this happened in less than 5 seconds.

In such a short time, communications between Shidou and <Fraxinus> were completely terminated.

Kurumi distorted her lips into a crooked grin as she once again turned her eyes towards Shidou.

“——Even so now?”

“……”

Shidou was speechless for an instant.

Losing contact with <Fraxinus> was the equivalent of being isolated in front of a Spirit. If Kurumi had that motive, it would have been very easy for him to *be eaten*.

However——

“——Even so, I still want to.”’

Shidou replied without avoiding eye contact with Kurumi.

Certainly it seemed that Kurumi’s actions were meant to block a method of retreat for Shidou. Nevertheless, for him it seemed like she was willing to tell only him secrets that she never wished to reveal to anyone else.

If he could not respond to this act of humanity, then he would have no right to act qualified to save the Spirits.

“……”

Seeing such a reaction from Shidou, Kurumi placed the pistol back into the shadow and quickly turned her back towards Shidou.

“Please follow me.”

Then, as Kurumi finished, she hurriedly walked towards the darkened road.

“Ah, hey.”

They went on walking for about 20 minutes.

Kurumi guided Shidou through a back alleyway and inside an old communal building.

Although the building had the appearance of being abandoned and was scribbled with graffiti, electricity was still passing through. Following the blinking, but still reliable, lighting, Shidou climbed up the stairs and reached a room in the third

floor.

“Come in, Shidou-san.”

“Here is……”

As he whispered, Shidou looked around his surroundings.

There were no major differences in this one room in the abandoned building. But unlike the corridor, the floor here was swept cleanly, a curtain was hanging on the window, and a simple as possible bed was placed here.

“I have several strongholds in this city; this is one of them. Although there is nothing here, please be at ease.”

“……I see. It’s a pleasure to be invited into a girl’s room.”

“Ufufu, there’s so much flattery from you, Shidou-san.”

Kurumi gave a slight giggle as she smiled, taking off her coat as she then placed it on the hanger. Then she stretched out her hand towards Shidou, who slightly inclined his head.

“Ah, thank you.”

Shidou imitated Kurumi’s actions, as he handed over his coat to her as both of their coats were placed on the hanging rack. Then, while slowly nearing Shidou —— “……”

Without warning, Kurumi pressed her body against Shidou’s chest.

“Kurumi……?”

“Shidou-san, you said that you wanted to know everything about me.”

“……Ah.”

After hearing Shidou’s reply, Kurumi, after not saying anything for a few seconds, buried her face in his chest, after that—— “——Then please accept it.”

Kurumi spoke while slowly moving her left hand which, unbeknownst to him, was holding a pistol once again.

“<Zafkiel>——The Tenth Bullet <Yud>.”

Kurumi's shadow slowly creeped as it was sucked into the muzzle of the pistol.

In one flowing movement, the pistol was aligned with his temple——then, acting as if it were her own head, she pulled to the trigger on Shidou.

◇◇◇

How long had it been since then?

One day, in an all-girls school, inside a certain restroom.

"……Hm"

Kurumi looked into the mirror and stared at her own face through the reflection.

——An eyepatch covered the left eye on her face.

"After all, isn't it a little too conspicuous?"

While speaking, she removed the eyepatch. What was hidden underneath was now exposed and reflected by the mirror——her left eye had changed its appearance into a golden clock.

It wasn't anything like special color contacts or remarkable make-up. It was hard to believe, but it was to the extent that there were even minute and second hands, ticking time with a *clink*, *clink* sound.

Yes, a few days ago, Kurumi encountered the mysterious girl——Mio. Ever since she had been given an item resembling a gemstone with a miraculous radiance, her left eye had changed into something completely different from that of an ordinary human.

No——to be specific, that wasn't the only thing mismatched.

"……Ufufu."

Kurumi gently laughed while looking at her eyes through the mirror.

She would be lying if she said that there were no fears or anxiety over her body becoming an unusual existence. However, compared to that, Kurumi was filled

with a feeling of fulfillment and euphoria.

Then.

“——Kurumi-san, is there something wrong?”

“……?”

Being suddenly accosted, Kurumi quickly placed the eyepatch back to its original position.

Turning to the direction of the voice, Kurumi discovered that it was her friend standing there ——Yamauchi Sawa. Kurumi’s hands trembled at the misunderstanding.

“N-Nothing, there’s nothing at all.”

“……..”

As Kurumi nervously spoke, Sawa stared intently on Kurumi’s face.

“Is it better? That left eye.”

“E-Eh, it’s still a little bit troublesome to see.”

“That sounds really serious…… Please take of your body.”

After expressing her concerns about Kurumi’s health, Sawa remembered something.

“Come to think of it, Kurumi-san, are you free after school today? My aunt said she wanted to bring Chestnut’s siblings to come and play.”

“Eh……!?”

Hearing this sudden invitation, Kurumi’s eyebrows slightly twitched.

Chestnut was a cat boasting a high ranking in cuteness, but to hear of his siblings at this time… It would be a fluffy, fluffy paradise for anyone. Remembering the feeling of Chestnut’s velvety fur and soft paws, Kurumi was momentarily enchanted.

However, she immediately regained her composure and shook her head—— today there was an errand that she couldn’t put aside no matter what.

“I-I’m sorry, but I will have to refuse.”

“Ah, do you have something you need to do?”

“Yes…… a little errand, but please invite me again.”

“That’s a shame, but it can’t be helped. Next time then.”

“Absolutely, absolutely, right?”

“Y-Yeah, I understand.”

Confronted with Kurumi’s relentless desire, Sawa could only give a wry smile as sweat dropped down her cheek.

——After school on that day.

Kurumi was standing alone on the roof of a building in the outskirts of town.

The red sunset was shining on her back, as the wind blew on the skirt of her uniform.

“Come on.”

As if to match the sound of Kurumi’s complaints, small footsteps echoed from behind.

Turning backwards, Kurumi found the figure of a girl who was not there before.

Takamiya Mio, the girl who appeared before Kurumi a few days ago and gave her *power*.

“Ya~, Kurumi. Please do your best again today.”

“Hm, please leave it to me, Mio-san.”

Just as Kurumi replied back, the voice in the surroundings disappeared at the same time.

Yes, it was just like the first time Kurumi had met Mio.

Kurumi didn’t know the detailed principle behind this, but it seemed to be due to Mio’s ability.

By enchanting the surroundings with something resembling a barrier, she could

prevent the *enemy* from escaping outside.

The next moment, an abnormality appeared below Kurumi.

A snowstorm, suddenly ice crystals and snow appeared and began to swirl into a whirlpool.

Within that whirlpool—— *it* suddenly appeared.

An anomaly as if the ice took on the appearance of a doll's silhouette.

Although it was her first time seeing this, there was no doubt.

——Spirit. With tremendous power, Mio described it as a calamity killing this world.

"Well, I'll be heading out now."

After Kurumi briefly spoke, she infused her feet with power as she lightly jumped over the fence of the building.

Falling from the sky, she turned her body with the goal of landing in front of the ice Spirit. But of course, her jumping down was far from suicidal behavior.

"Astral Dress <Elohim>."

The moment Kurumi chanted that name, shadows engulfed her body, forming a shining dress made of light particles.

And——

"——<Zafkiel>!"

As Kurumi called out that name, two old-fashioned pistols tailored for her at varying lengths manifested in front of her hands.

"Really, you came at the wrong time——I'm in a bit of a bad mood today."

Kurumi sharpened her gaze. Falling down from the building, she pointed her pistols towards the Spirit of Ice.

——Kill the Spirits in order to save the world.

The self-proclaimed *Ally of Justice*, Takamiya Mio-san, told her so after giving *power* to Kurumi.

An absolute Astral Dress——and an Angel that could control time and shadow, <Zafkiel>.

It was just like a scene from a children's anime. If she wanted to talk about this to her friends and family, they would have surely laughed it aside as an absurd event she made up as an embarrassing joke.

However, for Kurumi, who was chosen to wear an Astral Dress and wield an Angel, it was no laughing matter.

The existence of supernatural power that went beyond common sense.

And the presence of an enemy that must be slain.

Although Kurumi grew up in a peaceful environment, the experience of being attacked by a grotesque monster and being saved by a mysterious girl allowed her to accept much of it as reality.

——Thus, Tokisaki Kurumi became a hunter for Spirits.

Obviously, it was a life and death threat, and she was not completely devoid of all fear.

However, this life would not still be here had Mio not arrived to aid her——not to mention, the goal of *saving the world* aroused emotions smoldering deep within Kurumi's heart.

With a desire to help, the hands of the people occasionally gained strength, but lacked the means and methods of achieving such a goal.

The feeling of saving the world with her own hands filled the empty hole within Kurumi's heart.

Because of that——Kurumi began fighting.

In order to protect her world, family, and friends, she killed the monsters that appeared in the city.

She was convinced that it was for everyone.

She was convinced that it was for herself.

She was convinced that——it was the meaning of her own existence.

However, the end of that dream came earlier than expected.

——That day. On that day, Kurumi and Mio were suppressing another Spirit together.

A variant cladded in flames through its entire body, every step it took caused the residue heat to ignite the surrounding buildings, streets, and trees.

It was too much of a powerful and daunting enemy.

However, Kurumi was not afraid. Grasping <Zafkiel> with both hands, she fired off a relentless bombardment of bullets again and again.

“That’s it——it’s over……!”

“———————”

Along with the fading sound of gunfire, the Spirit of Fire finally collapsed. However, its body was still faintly moving, with her ash-like wrist stretching out towards Kurumi.

“——How persistent.”

Kurumi spat out a sigh of annoyance, as she moved to fire a round at the Spirit’s head. After that, the Spirit’s body remained motionless.

“Really…… it’s finally over.”

“——Thank you so much for your trouble.”

“Kya!”

Startled by the voice coming behind her, Kurumi’s body cowered instinctively for a second.

Looking back, she saw that Mio had unexpectedly appeared.

“Please stop appearing so suddenly; you startled me.”

As Kurumi spoke, Mio lowered her head as if to say sorry.

“As usual, I will do the rest of the handling process. You go back first. If I remember correctly, didn’t you say you had a promise with a friend?”

“Hm…… I’ll go do that. Take care then.”

After Kurumi said that, she let her Astral Dress and Angel fade into light particles

while walking away from that spot.

Kurumi had long become accustomed to such an interaction where she would leave Mio's barrier and wended her way on the road for a while.

She glanced at a watch——today it was planned that she would go to Sawa's house to play with Chestnut's brothers and sisters, but it seemed that there was still some time left.

"——That's right."

Kurumi clapped her hands as she headed back to the original direction she came from.

There was no special reason, only that she thought it would be nice to bring Mio over to Sawa's house.

It had been a while since she and Mio began suppressing the Spirits, but even then they stillnever talked to each other outside of the battlefield. Kurumi was sure that even Mio, who always seemed to air a faint melancholic facial expression, would smile after touching a cute cat.

However——

"……Huh?"

Turning around the alley, she was just about to return to where she had been fighting the Spirit up until now. But abruptly, Kurumi stopped her feet dead in her tracks.

Mio was standing there as expected——yet what had fallen was not a monster, but rather a human girl.

"……"

No——not just that. Kurumi was so surprised that she choked on her own dry voice.

Yes, what had fallen down there…

…was Kurumi's friend, Yamauchi Sawa.

"Wha…… huh……?"

While being unable to understand the meaning of what happened in front of her,

Kurumi stared with eyes wide aghast.

As if noticing Kurumi's return, Mio slowly turned her body over towards her direction.

"……Ah, Kurumi, you came back. ——That's regrettable, I wanted to be a good partner for you for just a bit longer."

While speaking, Mio completely turned over to face Kurumi.

——In her hands lay a floating gem glowing red.

No doubt about it, although the color was different, it was the same thing that Mio had given Kurumi.

"W-What do you mean…… Why is Sawa-san……"

"Ah, was this your acquaintance? That is really…… I did something inexcusable."

"……Could it be that——"

Kurumi placed her hand near her mouth. In front of the various materials on display, a line connecting the scattered dots formed in her mind. Kurumi felt a tremendous urge to vomit from the back of her stomach.

"……After all, you are very smart."

Mio's short answer served nothing but despair to Kurumi.

Yes, the position where Sawa was lying down was exactly where Kurumi shot and slew the Spirit of Fire.

And then, the Sephira Crystal was nestled in Mio's hands. What that meant was —— "That Spirit was…… Sawa-san……?"

Kurumi quietly murmured as she felt her heart tightly contract.

This Spirit wasn't the only one. Kurumi had defeated more than 50 Spirits over the course of various places. Perhaps those were all humans too.

No, on the contrary, even Kurumi had also been given that Sephira Crystal—— "Ah… AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH……!?"

At that moment, Kurumi fell down on her knees. Her head and heart were creaking in terrible pain——despair. That pitch black feeling began to corrode her heart. It was like a hallucination of her very existence turning inside out.

——Not good, not good, this feeling mustn't be allowed.

Instinctively aware that this feeling was far from benign, Kurumi subconsciously raised her right hand.

"……<Z-Zafkiel>…… the Fourth Bullet <Dalet>."

Then, as Kurumi stammered to say that name, the Angel manifested, allowing her to fire out the bullet at her own head.

——Unwinding the time of the target, the Fourth Bullet <Dalet>.

In order to rewind her body, her mind back to a *state before feeling despair*.

"Ah…… ah…… ah……"

As her breathing struggled to regain a constant pace, Kurumi glared intently at Mio.

However, Mio was neither frightened nor shaking. Rather, her eyes were wide open, struck by the marvelous occurrence.

"How surprising, to think that you would fend off the Inversion through your own power……

but you really saved me the trouble. It would have been tough to purify the refined Sephira Crystal back."

"Inversion…… r-refined……?"

After Kurumi asked, Mio, between her thoughts, made a gesture of nodding her head.

"Un, I bet you've already noticed it, but Spirits are humans that have received Sephira Crystals. ——No, I've distributed my power to them; would that statement be more accurate? Originally, the word Spirit only referred to me, the First Spirit."

"Wha……"

"——But, the original Sephira Crystals are incompatible with human attributes. If

such a thing is forcibly given, human beings would not be able to suppress the overflowing power, and it would run rampant."

So, Mio continued on.

"In order to make the Sephira Crystals compatible with humans, purification is necessary.

Then, if you give the refined Sephira Crystal to a qualified person, they will become Spirits while retaining their sense of self——just like you."

"……Could it be, purification is——"

Kurumi's eyes opened wide in horror, as a fear passed through her mind that caused the roots of her teeth to tremble.

However, Mio continued speaking in an indifferent manner.

"Un, if passed through the human body, of course that person would run rampant. But if the process is repeated several times, the Sephira Crystals recovered from that body are cleanly purified. Imagine something like a filtration device; would that be easier to understand?

However, recovery of the Sephira Crystal is very difficult. I was really saved because you were there."

Mio's answer was not bad; it was the worst imaginable reply. Kurumi clutched onto her chest in order to prevent the feeling of despair from re-surging.

——Everything was understood.

Kurumi had been used by Mio.

While intending to save the world——Kurumi had been killing humans.

With a look brimming with anger, Kurumi squeezed out a roar from her throat.

"Why…… would you ever want to do such a thing……!"

As Kurumi asked while screaming, for the first time Mio displayed a very difficult expression.

"……I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. I have no grudge against you. But I can't stop—— not until all of the Sephira Crystals are entrusted to humanity."

As Mio spoke, she turned her hand towards Kurumi.

“——Until then, good night, Kurumi. Thank you for everything so far.”

“What are you do——”

Kurumi’s words suddenly ended.

No, it would be better to say that her consciousness was interrupted there.

——When was the next time of waking up.

“……Ara, ara……?”

In the midst of a blurry consciousness, Kurumi opened her eyes.

With a cloudy memory, she couldn’t remember anything. The only things she could recall were her own name and the extraordinary power she was wielding.

Looking around, the street center was destroyed as if caused by a meteor impact. Kurumi was standing at the center of the crater.

“Yes, where is here… exactly……”

In the sight spreading beyond her eyes, there were too many unknown factors for her brain to handle.

Where here was, who she was, why she was here——

As Kurumi sorted through such matters, a noise from afar buzzed in her ears.

“——Ara?”

Looking around, she saw people flying in the sky while wearing mechanical armor. At that strange sight, Kurumi’s eyes were dazed in amazement.

“How amazing…… What exactly is that……”

However, they wouldn’t let Kurumi continue her words for long. Aligning the weapons in their hands, they fired numerous bombs and missiles at Kurumi.

“Kiki……!”

With her shoulders trembling, Kurumi quickly fled into her shadow.

Although her memory was still completely missing, she could still somehow

remember to use the power within her body.

“Ha…… Ha, huh…… that caught me off guard……”

In that dark space, Kurumi took a deep breath as she tried to rearrange the current situation in her mind.

However, because the information at hand was inadequate, there was nothing she could do.

Besides her name, the only thing she could remember were about Angels and the Astral Dress—— “————”

At that time, Kurumi concocted an idea. She lifted up her right hand and called out the name of the Angel.

“<Zafkiel>——the Tenth Bullet <Yud>…… would that be right?”

Kurumi spoke with an uneasy voice, and a short gun with bullet appeared in her hand.

Although it was something that she had called, Kurumi issued a ‘wow’ to exemplify her surprise.

“I-It really appeared!”

The Tenth Bullet <Yud>, if her gut feeling was correct, this bullet should convey the memories of whatever object it is fired upon to her. If fired upon herself, then she should be able to recall everything that her brain had experienced.

Kurumi’s fingers trembled as she pressed the muzzle at the side of her head, but she was still determined to pull the trigger.

Bang, that effect resounded within the sound of the bullet striking Kurumi’s head.

That moment——

“————”

The turbulent flow of memory rushed into Kurumi’s mind.

The girl that she had met once - Mio.

And——by her own hand, what happened to her best friend.

The crime committed by her deceit.

“Ah…… ahhhhhhhhhh……”

With trembling hands, Kurumi dropped the gun as she fell to her knees.

Endless regret and despair pervaded the bottom of her heart.

Recalling even the sadness amidst the foolishness of what she had done.

——However.

Soon after, Kurumi raised her head.

There stood no longer a lady who immersed herself in peace, a child who dreamed of being a partner to justice.

What her expression revealed was indefatigability.

What shined in her eyes was fury.

Although she didn’t understand what Mio was thinking, Kurumi was still alive.

And in her hands——the only power to interfere with time in this world, the strongest Angel, <Zafkiel>.

Everything was not over yet.

To redo the world.

No matter how much sacrifice she had to atone.

All in order to remake history.

Even if it led this body towards utter destruction.

Kurumi once again stood up on both her feet and began walking forward.

◇◇◇

“……!?”

Slowly opening his eyes, Shidou scanned his surroundings.

A dimly lit room of a residential building. Kurumi was reclining on his chest, her warm body temperature being conveyed over to him.

At that time, Shidou finally remembered.

Right now, he was on a date with Kurumi.

“J-Just now was……”

Daydreaming——the time might have been too late, but sensually it was close to that.

It was like the feeling of experiencing someone else’s life. Until a few seconds ago, Shidou’s consciousness had certainly converted into *Kurumi’s*.

Then, Shidou noticed, the words Kurumi had recited just before pointing the muzzle at his temple——the Tenth Bullet <Yud>.

Shidou had seen this once before. One of <Zafkiel>’s powers, the ability to convey memories held within objects.

No, Kurumi had shot Shidou through the head with the short gun.

That could only mean one thing.

What Shidou had just seen was neither an illusion nor a dream——but rather something that had once actually happened in Kurumi’s past.

“——I’ll.”

Kurumi spoke in an almost speechless and overflowing manner.

“In order to kill the Spirit of Origin. No matter what happens. No matter——what I have to do.”

Kurumi tightly grasped onto Shidou’s shirt as she continued on.

“I cannot say what I’m doing is right. While riding on the First Spirit’s cajolery, I killed a lot of people——even now I carry on to pile up a mountain of corpses in order to eradicate the existence of that Spirit. I am evil, unmistakably an enemy of mankind. Killing, killing, continuing to kill, a <Nightmare> that tramples death upon death. If there really is a hell, a special seat will be reserved to send me straight down to the bottom.”

“But…”

Kurumi clenched her hand into a fist.

“I don’t mind, so long as before I fall into the prison of the earth, I can personally alter it such that the First Spirit, Takamiya Mio—— *never existed*.”

“Mio……”

Shidou repeated that name in a hoarse voice. Mio. He had heard of that name before.

Yes, he had heard that name from Mana before. The very same name that Shidou himself had also said while in the depths of a trance-like state and having his *reiryoku* run out of control.

And also…… Takamiya. That surname was unquestionable the same as Mana’s.

——Unknown meaning. The various information mixed together jumbled Shidou’s thoughts into chaos.

But for Shidou right now, there was already no time left to afford in dwelling this over.

Kurumi, after being exhausted from telling everything, slowly took a deep breath as she loosened the grip on Shidou’s clothes.

“I will redo everything. I will restore everything that has happened so far back to zero.”

Kurumi lifted up her head from being buried in Shidou’s chest and stared directly at his eyes.

“That is my purpose, the meaning of my existence——for that, the power of the Spirits held within Shidou-san is necessary.”

Kurumi finished her words with an almost pleading-like tone before continuing to answer Shidou.

“Of course, I do not plan to hide it behind lip service. If I *eat* Shidou-san, Shidou-san will die.

——But as long as I get the *reiryoku* that Shidou-san has, I can surely change history.”

“History——”

Hearing these words, Shidou could not help but remember the time he traveled back in time with Kurumi.

So, he knew best that what Kurumi had said was not a dream-like delusion.

After all, Shidou had changed the history of the world once.

——By none other than the power of Kurumi’s Angel.

“Yes, by erasing the First Spirit, I would have never become a Spirit. In other words——the fact that Shidou-san was *eaten* will also disappear.”

So, Kurumi gazed intently at Shidou.

“Shidou-san, if you believe in me, please give that power, that life to me. —— Please just lend me a moment.”

“——”

It was a different gaze from that which Kurumi usually made to make fun of him, a serious look that couldn’t help but render Shidou speechless.

The reason was understandable. However, it did not change that he would be losing his life.

Normally Shidou would have thought about that.

However, right now in Shidou’s mind, there was another different kind of feeling coming and going.

——Regret that ran rampant like a raging wave.

Anger that scorched one’s body.

At that time, if I didn’t reach out.

At that time, if I didn’t pull the trigger.

At that time, if I didn’t hunt down the Spirits.

If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have become what I am now.

I must kill. I must erase. I must make her *never exist*.

For friends, for the world, for the lives that she had *eaten*.

It was apparent that those thoughts did not belong to Shidou.

However, because of experiencing Kurumi's life, the shared emotions had also devastated Shidou's heart.

"I want——"

"……"

As Shidou let out a trembling voice, Kurumi hid her eyes beneath her bangs for a moment before lifting her head with resolution.

"Of course, I don't think that it's a fair deal. Even though I wish to make sure everything *never existed*, there is no difference that I am demanding Shidou-san's life…… so for now, at least a promise."

As Kurumi said that, she leisurely used her hand to remove the button on her blouse.

"……!? H-Hey……?"

In response to Kurumi's unexpected behavior, Shidou gave out a panicked expression.

However, Kurumi didn't seem to mind, as her hands continued to take off the clothes that she was wearing one by one.

The underwear chosen at the lingerie shop was already exposed during daytime. That piece did not seem suitable for her, but it still stood out to highlight Kurumi's bewitching flirtation.

Reaching out you could touch it.

And Kurumi would certainly not refuse.

This incredible sensation made Shidou's head feel like he had a fever.

"……"

As if aware of Shidou's heart, Kurumi reached out and grabbed his hand.

Then, she pulled Shidou's hands in manner like they were moving on their own. Waddling the fingers to let them slide across the brassiere strap.

“————”

Shidou could not resist the excitement exceeding the maximum permissible level. His fingers were under Kurumi’s guidance to pull down the shoulder strap.

But that alone wasn’t the final touch. In the same manner, Kurumi pulled Shidou’s hands towards her abdomen, letting the fingers hang near her underwear.

The hand ever so slowly fell down. As Kurumi’s soft skin gradually became exposed, Shidou couldn’t take his eyes off her.

Without anything to cover herself, Kurumi, with slightly flushed cheeks, once again turned to Shidou.

“——I will give you everything except my *reiryoku* (Life).”

“W-What……”

That word leaked out from his throat.

In the dark room, the moonlight seeping through the gap in the curtains faintly illuminated Kurumi’s porcelain skin.

In this excessively dreamy scene, Shidou’s mind first recalled the feeling of some kind a familiar vision rather than pure carnal desire.

Kurumi slowly walked forward, coming into closer contact with his hand. ——No, this was to push Shidou’s body, knocking him down to the bed behind.

Kurumi was lying on top of Shidou’s body. With uneven breathing, she brought her hand near the button of Shidou’s clothes.

“H-Hey, Kurumi……”

Shidou spoke uneasily as he wanted to push Kurumi aside. But the other party was a Spirit, even though weaker than Tohka in pure strength, and Shidou could not compete as a human.

No, perhaps contrary to Shidou’s will, his body would instinctively refuse resistance.

To the extent of how much he had thought of such a thing, Kurumi was—— beautiful.

Jokes aside, if he could get her, even losing his life didn’t matter. It was enough to

plunder one's mind.

"Shidou-san, Shidou-san. If you wish, I will do anything. If you ask, I can do anything."

"K-Kurumi……"

A conflict between rationality and instinct, it felt as if his brainstem was being grilled.

If he was the slightest distracted, he would be left at Kurumi's mercy.

However——

"……!?"

The next moment, as Kurumi fingers were about to touch Shidou's skin, a loud noise suddenly broke through. It was as if the window had been broken as several girls flew into the room after pulling the curtain apart.

——Girls who had the exact same appearance.

"Fo-un-d you."

"……Hmm? Have you been looking forward to it?"

"That is really nauseous. Alright, we'll let you finish first. For a man to die without ever knowing a woman is truly pitiful."

"Wh——"

Shidou turned in astonishment at the girls who appeared suddenly.

But that was only natural since those girls had appeared in the dream Shidou had a few days ago.

"……Ara, ara."

However, Kurumi's reaction was a bit different from Shidou's.

Compared to surprise, the surface of her face was more filled with anger and frustration.

"Counterfeit Sprits, it takes a great deal of courage to disturb my and Shidou-san's tryst."

While still naked, Kurumi quickly stood up.

Hearing those words, the expressions on those girls' faces quickly changed.

"Oh? Did you say…… 'counterfeit'?"

"Is it okay to think that you are insulting our father?"

"Unforgivable!"

After being finished speaking, the girls sharpened their gaze and pounced on Kurumi all at once.

"Kurumi——!"

However, Kurumi calmly turned herself around. Unbeknownst to him, her ancient-styled pistols were already in her hands as she pulled the trigger continuously.

"<Zafkiel>——the Seventh Bullet <Zayin>!"

The girls who touched the bullet were paused still in the air, frozen after trying to rush after Kurumi.

The Seventh Bullet <Zayin> stopped the time of the target that had been shot. <Zafkiel>'s certain kill blow.

"——Umm."

Kurumi made sullen grunt as she turned her back against those girls.

Then, in accordance to that action, number of *hands* grew from the shadow spreading on the wall floor of the room, dragging the girls' bodies into the shadow.

"<Zafkiel>——the Fourth Bullet <Dalet>."

As Kurumi spoke, she aligned the muzzle to the fragmented debris of the broken window, firing off a jet-black bullet.

At the next moment, the shards of glass floated in the air and reshaped the window as if playing a video clip in reverse.

After a couple of seconds, the room regained the same stillness and loneliness as before.

Kurumi took in a light sigh, dropping the pistols into the shadow while working hard to face towards Shidou.

“Some hindrances got in the way. Really, to think that they would even come at this time.”

Kurumi said as she struggled to stand up, placing her hand up against the wall.

“Kurumi……?”

“It’s nothing…… really——”

Kurumi tried to smile while trying to return to Shidou, however—— Just like a puppet with its strings severed, she collapsed onto the ground.

Chapter 5 - Samsara of Salvation

"—Did you fail?"

In a room within DEM Industries' Japanese branch, Ellen returned the report from her subordinate with a displeased and mocking expression.

"Strange to say, but even Ike's dispatched <Beelzebub> is struggling to make a difference.

Presently, there's an accumulation in the record of failures. What on earth is the problem? I'd like to question if there is any reason other than the pure ability of the performer."

"Ellen is really incredible. Only thorns dwell in your words."

Artemisia spoke back with a wry smile. Ellen produced a 'humph' sound with her nose as she made an exaggerated gesture by crossing her feet together.

Then, in rhythm with that action, several sheets of paper that were carried by the wind fluttered in from the entrance of the room.

All of a sudden, a few girls with the same appearance emerged from the sheets of paper.

"Well, you're not really qualified to say that."

"Aren't you the first person to fail?"

"It's annoying to be given that angry look. How old are you?"

"……What was that?"

Ellen glared at the <Nibelcol> with a sharp gaze. The <Nibelcol> pretended to be deliberately afraid, trembling while giving out a 'kya, kya'.

Ellen didn't have the time to be angry at the <Nibelcol>, but it was necessary for them to understand what it meant to insult Ellen, who was the strongest. Ellen narrowed her brow as she gave the command from her brain to expand a voluntary territory.

However, Ellen's Realizer manifestation device didn't activate.

Just before she could, Westcott had entered the room.

“Yā~, it seems that everyone has already gathered.”

“——Ike.”

Ellen suspended her commands as she got up from her chair and fixed her posture.

Following suit, Artemisia mimicked her action in also standing upright.

“! Otou-sama!”

The <Nibelcol>’s expression suddenly brightened as they ran to Westcott’s side.

As Westcott walked towards Ellen, he slowly stroked the heads of the <Nibelcol>. His actions were shaped by the movement of his facial muscles, a tasteless and odorless smile.

“It seems like progress isn’t going smoothly. Is the manpower inadequate?”

“No, it’s not something like that……”

As Ellen tried to answer, the <Nibelcol>’s cries blocked out her words.

“Father, you have to listen to me. Every time there are troublemakers that get in the way.”

“Yes, yes, it’s so frustrating. What is that child called?”

“She’s called <Nightmare>, right? Really it’s so troublesome. If she wasn’t there, we can’t even imagine the number of times Itsuka Shidou’s head should have dropped by now.”

“Humph……”

After listening to the <Nibelcol>’s words, Westcott gave out a small groan. Then, he placed his hand beside his chin, deep in thought.

“<Nightmare>——? It’s strange to think of the Worst Spirit protecting a human. The only way to counter <Nibelcol>’s numbers should be her clones.”

“But isn’t she still a bit too far ahead of us? Undoubtedly, even by using <Beelzebub>’s investigation powers and the overwhelming number of <Nibelcol> to attack, everything done is still blocked by her.”

After Artemisia finishing speaking, Westcott gave another groan before raising the corners of his mouth.

“Maybe——she’s already aware of it. If that weren’t the case, she couldn’t hide from <Beelzebub>’s investigation.”

“Do you mean that the information of our attack was leaked?”

“No, not the plan of the attack, but rather the attack itself.”

“……?”

In response to Westcott’s words, Ellen titled her head in curiosity.

◇◇◇

“——Kurumi! Kurumi!”

They were at an abandoned building in the outskirts of Tenguu City. In that room, Shidou ran towards Kurumi, who had just collapsed and fell onto the ground.

After covering Kurumi’s naked body with a sheet, he careful changed her position as he brought his ears closer to her mouth in order to confirm that she was still breathing.

Although small, definite sounds of breathing shook his eardrums. Shidou, feeling relieved for the time being, began to gently shake Kurumi’s shoulders.

“Kurumi, are you okay, Kurumi!”

Then, Shidou repeated the name again, as if trying to stir up Kurumi’s consciousness.

“——Please wait for a moment, Shidou-san.”

Kurumi replied back in a quiet voice.

“……!?”

However, Shidou’s expression was still filled with befuddlement because Kurumi

was stilllying asleep on the ground, her lips remaining motionless.

Even so, he immediately understood the identity of the person behind the voice.

A girl, who had the same face as Kurumi, leisurely stepped out from a shadow on the wall.

No doubt, it was a clone of Kurumi created by <Zafkiel>.

The clone of Kurumi placed her index finger near Shidou's mouth before hushing him. She made a complex facial expression while bending her knees down next to the original Kurumi.

"Please have some peace of mind, Shidou-san; *I* am only asleep. Please allow *me* to have a little bit of rest."

'T-That's fine, but why did Kurumi just collapse now……"

As Shidou spoke, the clone gently stroked the original's cheek before returning her attention back to him.

"It's because it was too difficult for *me* to partake in such a big fight despite the current state of exhaustion."

"W-What does that mean……?"

"……."

In response to Shidou's question, the clone suddenly exposed a hesitant expression.

She understood the reason, but it seemed like she was wondering whether or not it was appropriate to tell Shidou.

The next moment, a silhouette emerged from behind the clone.

Of course, like the clone, she also had the exact appearance as Kurumi. However, she was wearing a monotone gothic Lolita Dress rather than the usual black and red Astral Dress. A beautiful artisan's rose decorated her head while an eyepatch for medical use masked her left eye.

"You are……"

Looking at that figure made Shidou's eyes widen.

She was the Kurumi from five years ago, whom Shidou had seen after traveling back to the past with the power of the Twelfth Bullet <Yud Bet>. But he immediately understood what was going on. <Zafkiel>'s Eighth Bullet <Het> had reproduced a clone from Kurumi's past.

That is to say, even if the clone was from five years ago, it wasn't anything strange.

After some hesitation, eyepatch-Kurumi gently placed her hands on his shoulder, her red eye staring at Shidou's blank ones.

"Shidou-san, are you prepared to listen to the truth?"

"Huh……?"

"If you don't ask anything, pretending not to know anything, then after *me* wakes up, everything will return back to normal. But even so, do you still want to know the truth?"

Eyepatch-Kurumi narrowed her eyes as she spoke. As if she saw through the confusion and hesitation in his heart, Shidou seemed to have momentarily flinched.

However, Shidou gritted his teeth to strongly urge himself as he tried to return eyepatch-Kurumi's stare.

Then, eyepatch-Kurumi began giggling, laughing as though she had just pretended for a joke.

"Ara, ara, if you wait so silently, you may have well just not continued."

"……! H-Hey, you!"

"Just joking——for your determination, I offer endless gratitude."

Eyepatch-Kurumi gave off a pleasant expression as she slowly stood and placed the index finger and thumb of her right hand against Shidou.

Almost——as if she was aiming at Shidou with a gun.

Then, she said.

Something far too detached from reality, words that bordered on the absurd.

"Speaking from the conclusion——Shidou-san, you are already dead."

Eyepatch-Kurumi declared so; she raised the tips of her fingers, as if to indicate a *boom* from shooting a general bullet.

"……What?"

Shidou, who had no idea what eyepatch-Kurumi was saying, uttered an inaudible voice.

"What are you saying……? I'm…… dead? Oi, oi, then what am I doing still moving right now.

Or did I unconsciously go to heaven?"

"Ufufu, then that means right now I'm a goddess here."

Eyepatch-Kurumi once again spoke in a jocular manner.

However, her expression immediately quieted down as she continued to speak.

"In other words, Shidou-san should already be dead…… no, it's the possibility of already being dead."

"What…… are you saying?"

Shidou didn't know how to issue a good response to that statement.

Already being dead——a possibility, if that was the case, then the shadow of a sudden death should exist in the daily life for all humanity.

However, Shidou could no longer continue. From eyepatch-Kurumi's expression, it didn't seem like she was kidding or deceiving him.

"……"

Having guessed Shidou's thoughts from looking at his mood, eyepatch-Kurumi kept talking after giving a sad smile.

◇◇◇

——On February 9th after school had finished Tokisaki Kurumi was the only

person on the school roof, gazing at the city landscape of Tenguu City from across the fence. She had no special meaning in being there, indulging in neither nostalgia nor anxious thoughts. In the first place, there was a sensation of sound sensibility that one memorized by gazing at such scenery, though Kurumi remained skeptical about such a thing still remaining in her mind.

Of course, even for Kurumi, she would laugh, get angry. When finding something enjoyable, she would smile——she would even shed tears during sad times.

However, despite being born as a human, she couldn't think that the contents of her mind, having spent most of her life as a Spirit, an avenger, and a murderer, would be the same as before.

The enjoyment she felt right now was certainly different from that of the old days.

The sorrow now remembered was surely different from that of yore.

However, only the persistent burning hatred in her heart stayed unmodified even after such a long time had passed.

"……"

The sun had already started to set, and the issue of night completely engulfing the building would happen sooner or later. Although she didn't know what time it was, she understood that it was almost the promised time.

"……Tired, I'm tired of waiting."

Kurumi muttered in a whisper as her fingers rode on the railing of the fence.

Then, a muffled voice, which seemed to answer her, was then heard from the shadows entrenched below Kurumi's feet.

"……Hey, *me*, is this really okay?"

"What's with your baffling words?"

Hearing the words of the clone, Kurumi cast a sharp glance back.

"I can't turn back now. Please understand the meaning of me devouring tens of thousands of lives despite still standing here. I will…… kill Shidou-san. That is the only way I can rewrite the world."

As Kurumi spoke, there was silence for a while. Then, a voice was heard from the shadow, it seemed to have come from a different clone.

"Although *the current me* can only ask if this is really okay, what on earth am *I* exactly thinking?"

"……"

Kurumi, after hearing the clone's words, twitched her eyebrow and then went to step on the shadow with the heel of her shoe.

The next moment, as if to replace that noise, the creaking of the door entered her eardrums.

Most likely Shidou had arrived. Kurumi took a deep breath to calm herself down before turning slowly to look at the entrance on the roof.

“——Ara.”

There stood Shidou, just as Kurumi had predicted. His expression was stiff with determination and tension as he stared at Kurumi.

“Ufufu, welcome. So you’ve really come to the appointed time, Shidou-san.”

Kurumi loosened her cheeks as she spoke, raising the hem of her skirt to give a gracious curtsy as if she was in line for a respectful ceremony.

Shidou, who was staring at Kurumi’s figure, blushed slightly for a moment. However, he shook his head at once as if to throw that thought out of his head.

At that instant, Kurumi glanced past Shidou and towards the door he had come from. Just after he passed through, the door felt like it moved slightly.

——Probably, Tohka and the others had come to peek at their situation after being worried about Shidou.

Although it couldn’t be helped, it meant that there was no trust between them. Kurumi sighed in a self-deprecating manner. Then, almost as if in conjunction with her actions, Shidou opened his mouth to speak.

“Kurumi, I’ve come just as promised.”

And so, Kurumi stared straight into the sight of those eyes gleaming with the radiance of a firm determination that indicated his awareness.

It hadn’t been even one year since she first met Shidou, but it felt like his strength had increased considerably. She unintentionally relaxed her mouth for a moment.

“——You have changed little by little, Shidou-san.”

“Huh……?”

“Right now, you’re face has grown up to become so much mature compared to when we first met. Well, after getting through that field of carnage maybe it’s a matter of course…… Ufufu you made it through wonderfully.”

“D-Don’t make fun of me.”

Shidou replied shyly. Although it was nearing sunset, it was still clearly visible that Shidou face was blushing red. It seemed that this cute scene still didn’t change.

“Compared to that, you should continue on from that conversation from this

morning; the conditions for sealing your *reiryoku*."

"……"

Kurumi laughed in response to Shidou's words.

Although it wasn't a facial expression indicating hostility, perhaps it might been the results of the other side personally showcasing the marginal superiority in her advantage. Shidou made a nervous expression as he gulped.

"Eh, eh. So then I'll tell you, I——"

——At that time.

The next moment just as Kurumi began to speak.

A single line passed through Kurumi's vision, as the scene in front of her eyes turned bright red.

"Eh……?"

Suddenly, Shidou didn't know what the hell happened, a shaky voice leaking out from his throat.

After a moment, Shidou understood that the bright red hue in front of his eyes was the color of the blood spewing from his chest.

"————"

Instantaneously.

Indeed, literally during the blink of a moment, Shidou was pierced through his chest by a girl flying in the sky.

Blonde hair dancing in the wind and an armor of platinum covered by fresh blood ——the Wizard Ellen Mathers.

"Ah……, ga……~aaah!"

Shidou, who fell down on the floor, screamed in pain. Hemoptysis, a lot of blood began spewing out from his mouth.

In that moment, the closed roof door was slammed open with extreme vigor.

"Shidou!"

“Shidou……!”

The Spirits who were eavesdropping by the door ran out in a panic. As a result of Shidou vomiting blood and convulsing, the light gathered around the Spirits who ran out as they assumed their Limited Astral Dresses.

However——

“……Humph.”

Ellen gave off a slight laugh filled with ridicule as she glanced towards the Spirits. Then, she suddenly raised her left hand.

Then, a portion of her CR-unit ejected countless sheets of paper, dancing in the air as it surrounded Ellen and Shidou.

Then, at the next moment, numerous girls with the same face emerged from the sheets of paper.

“……!?”

It was a scene resembling Kurumi’s clones emerging from her shadow. Wearing clothes that looked similar to an Astral Dress, and with fluttering charcoal hair, these girls stood there to block the Spirits’ path.

“Hey.”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t let you get in the way.”

“Well, although it’s hard to say, it looks like you’re going to bother us.”

“Wh……!? What are these guys?”

“Dismay. Who are you?”

The Yamai Sisters raised astonished voices as they summoned their Angel, <Raphael>.

Similarly, Tohka and Origami manifested their Angels in their hands and attacked the girls.

“Get out of the way, aaaaaaah!”

“Fuh——”

However——these girls did not try to avoid the blow.

While laughing with a thin smile on their faces, these girls gladly received the slash from <Sandalphon> and the artillery bombardment from <Metatron>.

Of course, this was not the end. These girls' bodies were either cut apart or punctured.

However, they did not even give a moan of anguish, let alone distort their faces to reflect a painful expression. They only smiled and laughed.

Then, in the gap of their attack, others girls, one by one, grappled Tohka's sword and Origami's feathers.

"……!"

Kurumi's expression could not help but tense up——as a matter of fact, although these girls had *reiryoku* within their bodies, they didn't have the power to compete against Tohka and the others as opponents.

However, the issue lay in their numbers and how they didn't care about the deaths of individuals within the group.

Although she didn't know their true identity, Kurumi understood from deep within her bones the degree of trouble so painfully, having used *quantity* as a weapon herself.

"—— *We*!"

In a moment after understanding that, Kurumi began to call forward.

As if in response to that, Kurumi's shadow began to expand from the floor of the rooftop, from which a large number of Kurumis appeared.

Then, the Kurumis, in response to their master's will, wrestled to restrict the unidentified girls stopping Tohka and the others.

Apart from that, she did not want to save Tohka and the others. But if left alone, Ellen would certainly kill Shidou. It was an unacceptable situation for Kurumi, who was seeking the *reiryoku* sealed within Shidou's body.

"Kihihi, hihi hihi!"

"Isn't this the patented skill that we have monopolise?"

“Haha, what is this?”

“Oh, so you are the rumored <Nightmare>? There are more of you than imagined.”

The Kurumis and the girls engaged in combat with each other, transforming the school rooftop into a scene of sanguinary annihilation.

However, that alone was not enough. The clones could only serve as opponents for those girls.

Kurumi pulled out a pistol from the shadows and aligned the muzzle to Ellen, who was stepping on Shidou’s back.

“——!?”

The moment she was about to pull the trigger, she saw that her arm was cut cleanly and flew into the air.

It was not an attack from Ellen.

Before unnoticed, another Wizard appeared just behind Kurumi.

“I will not let you succeed, <Nightmare>.”

“……Artemisia Ashcroft……!”

Kurumi gritted her teeth as she called out the name of the blonde girl.

A terrible pain was produced from having her arm cut off by the laser blade. Kurumi tightened biting her lip with her teeth as she endured the pain, escaping from Artemisia’s pursuit within that paper-thin difference.

Melee. A free for all fight. Swordsmanship with a hail of bullet.

Just in a few tens of seconds, the rooftop of the once peaceful school turned into a battlefield.

It was difficult to grasp what was happening anymore. Whether it was warding off Artemisia’s continuous sword blows, there was not even enough space to release the Fourth Bullet <Dalet>.

However, in the middle of that, one thing was certain.

Right now, Shidou’s life was about to be plucked away.

“——It’s over.”

With calm yet cruel words, Ellen Mathers swung the sword in her hand.

“Stop it, ahhhhhh!”

Tohka’s scream echoed throughout the battlefield.

However, Ellen’s hand did not stop.

With the sword knitted with dense magical power, it was very easy to decapitate Shidou’s head.

“——”

Gulu, a pool of blood was overflowing.

Already struggling to repair a fatal chest wound, the fiery flames of <Camael> that had been swaying on his chest gradually disappeared. As the power disappeared, Shidou’s hands and legs gradually stiffened.

It was just like the light of Shidou’s life being extinguished.

“——Ah.”

The Spirits who saw this sight fell onto the ground with their Angels.

Their faces grew pale as they began trembling. Sorrow. Loss. A sense of helplessness. No language could express the emotion invading their hearts.

If one were to describe it——it was like being filled with bottomless despair.

“Ha!”

“Guh——”

After escaping from an uncountable number of Artemisia’s attacks, Kurumi angrily clenched her teeth as she danced into the shadows.

“……Hah…… Hah……”

Moving through the shadows, Kurumi finally came out to the outside world.

She was now at a hill overlooking Raizen High School. The platform was bad because it wasn’t maintained like a park, but it was more convenient because

there were no people in the neighborhood.

“Are you alright, *me*.”

After a few minutes, a clone exposed her face from the shadows and asked with a worried expression.

Then, another clone crawled out of the shadows carrying the right arm that Artemisia had cut off.

“*Me*, here.”

“……Good.”

Kurumi responded back with thick sweat on her forehead. Then searched the shadow with the remaining left hand and took out the short gun of <Zafkiel> to load the *bullet*.

“<Zafkiel>——Fourth Bullet <Dalet>.”

After chanting out the name, Kurumi directed the path of the bullet towards her own temple.

At that moment, as though unwinding time, the severed arm flew into the air and reattached itself to the tip of her right arm.

“……!”

Then, Kurumi, having finished restoring her arm to its original state, had her eyes brighten up after seeing the scene at the end of her sight.

Raizen High School’s roof, on that side a tremendous flash of light sprouted out, burning the very sky above the earth.

With an intermittent echoing roar, the school building collapsed in an instant.

At last, there was a sharp alarm ringing throughout the town, but it was already too late. A huge tornado weltered around the school building, which had been reduced into rubble, magnifying the damage to the surrounding structures one after another. Then, a condensed jet-black light expanded radially from the center of the building. As far as one could see, the landscape had transformed into scorched earth.

“That is……”

“Tohka-san and the others are fighting……?”

The clones were surprised at the direction of the light.

However, Kurumi was aware that it was not just light radiating from *reiryoku*.

Even though they were talking at such a distance, there was an illusion of their skin being attacked by acupuncture needles.

Despair. Fury. Hatred. It was a sense of unleashing all those negative feelings from the body into a weapon.

Even if the *reiryoku* flowed backward from Shidou, this phenomenon would not happen. It was far from a matter of simple quantity of *reiryoku*. In the first place, the *quality* had transformed into something poles apart.

Yes, in other words, it was as if a positive value had been intuitively tacked with a minus.

Kurumi remembered this phenomenon. She wrinkled her eyebrows together before giving out a moan.

“Inversion——did it happen?”

“……!”

Hearing Kurumi’s words, the clones held their breath.

Without a doubt, the Spirits that were there——Tohka, Origami, and the Yamai Sisters, everyone had become an inverse Spirit.

But that was a reasonable story. With Shidou’s head flying out in front of them, it wasn’t difficult to imagine the abyss of despair swallowing them.

“Well——”

“……”

Suddenly, a voice interrupted Kurumi’s thought process, causing her to unexpectedly choke breathlessly.

Judging by a closer look, another clone was presenting herself from out of the shadow.

No——not just that. The clone was holding Shidou, being stained by the dark red

blood dripping from his body.

“*Me*, this is……!”

“Yeah, yeah…… it was a close call , but I would also blame myself for leaving it as it was.”

So with that said, the clone placed Shidou’s severed corpse on the ground.

“……the Fourth Bullet <Dalet>.”

Kurumi remained in silence for a while after shooting Shidou’s body with the gun in her hand.

Just like what happened previously with Kurumi’s arm, Shidou’s head, which had been separated from his torso, gently reattached itself to his body. The large hole in his chest had also been filled up.

However——it was just that.

Shidou’s eyes were still shut, no signs of even the slightest hint of breathing.

Indeed, the fourth bullet <Dalet> was a bullet capable of rewinding time. In fact, Shidou’s body had returned to the state of life. However, it was only to that extent. It was impossible to restore a life already lost.

“……..”

Kurumi, in order to calm down her heartbeat, took in a deep breath before thinking of about what to do next.

——While watching Shidou’s remains sleep peacefully, the scenery of the end of the world appeared beyond her line of sight.

However, after a moment of a silence, a voice leaked out from her throat.

“I……failed, didn’t I……?”

Such words were colored by pessimistic resignation.

——Just a few minutes ago, it’d been going so well. Kurumi tightened the grip on her fist so much that blood started to seep out.

By obtaining Shidou’s power, she would have used the twelfth bullet <Yud Bet> to return to thirty years ago and *erase* the existence of the First Spirit.

Then, everything was supposed to be rewarded.

Kurumi walked through thousands of days.

There were tens of thousands of lives lying before Kurumi's feet.

It was all brought to naught in the blink of an eye.

Shattered——because of someone.

By the hands of the hated Wizard, Ellen Mathers.

"Ah…… Ah, AH!"

Leaving it to her passion, Kurumi slammed the ground with her right arm.

Seeing the usually aloof Kurumi behave this way, the clone's shoulders began to suddenly tremble.

However, for Kurumi right now, there was no time to leisurely care about the clones' reaction.

Hope was cut off. Hope was broken——in the worst way possible by killing Shidou in front of her.

"……"

Thinking of that, Kurumi held her breath.

It was a matter of course for her heart to be filled with unspeakable hatred.

Regardless, the road where she so painstakingly struggled for the goal in her life had collapsed.

Moreover, everything was still caused by what the woman of origin had given.

If it had been Kurumi when she was younger, then perhaps she would have also inverted just like Tohka and the others.

Yet Kurumi realized that there were other emotions mixed in with said anger.

Ah——that's right.

Kurumi covered Shidou's forehead with hands stained with dust and blood, gently spreading his eyes wide open.

For Kurumi, she felt a deep sense of remorse for not being able to save Shidou from being killed right in front of her.

Endless sadness——a feeling of helplessness.

Kurumi's mind was lost in a chaotic whirlpool. Despite arriving at an answer, she still did not understand its meaning.

It was a tremendous contradiction. Why was Kurumi thinking that despite wanting to kill Shidou herself.

"Shidou…… -san……"

Various memories emerged from her mind. At the same time, various feelings were also intertwined, throwing Kurumi's mind into disarray.

Shidou. Itsuka Shidou. A boy who loved Spirits and was loved by Spirits. Even in front of Kurumi, he overcame his fear and extended out his hand.

Kurumi was unconsciously clinging onto the shoulder of Shidou's remains.

Placing her lips on top of his——

Still not lost in its softness, but also a very cold kiss.

Feeling that touch, Kurumi finally remembered.

In the game with Shidou——she was the one who was defeated.

"……To be unconscious even for the second kiss, what a really unfortunate one."

Kurumi slowly narrowed her eyes.

Last year in June, during an encounter with Shidou, Kurumi was defeated by the Spirit of Fire, Itsuka Kotori and narrowly escaped.

At that time, the person who stepped in between Kotori and Kurumi was none other than Shidou.

Although it was a slightly awkward performance for a knight, it did not change the fact that he saved her life. Before Kurumi escaped into the shadows, she left a kiss on his lips as a substitute for thanking him.

Although by now, all this had been completely gone.

——However.

"……Huh?"

At the next moment, Kurumi frowned at the strange sensation.

How could it be expressed? It was as if a warm thing had flown into her body.

Just like once, when Mio had handed her a Sephira Crystal—— "……<Zafkiel>!"

Remembering that time, Kurumi instinctively declared that name. In response to Kurumi's call , a huge clock appeared from within the shadows.

"……!"

"*Me*, this is……!"

The clone gave out a voice filled with astonishment.

However, that was unavoidable. Because on the clock, the numeral VI, whose color had faded ever since the battle against Kotori, was shining brightly.

"What does that mean……? No way——"

Kurumi slowly stood up, stroking each dial on the clock in order.

Accelerating the target, the First Bullet <Aleph>.

Slowing down the passage of time of an object, the Second Bullet <Bet>.

Causing the target to age, the Third Bullet <Gimmel>.

Rewinding the target's time, the Fourth Bullet <Dalet>.

Allowing a short-term prediction of the future, the Fifth Bullet <Hei>.

Stopping the target's time, the Seventh Bullet <Zayin>.

Reproducing a copy from one's past, the Eight Bullet <Het>.

Establishing a connection with a person on another time axis, the Ninth Bullet <Tet>.

Recalling the memory of the target shot, the Tenth Bullet <Yud>.

Directly engulfing a Spirits' power and travelling back in time, the Eleventh Bullet

<Yud Aleph> and the Twelfth Bullet <Yud Bet>.

Kurumi's hand finally touched the numeral located on the very bottom of the clock.

——The only numeral so far to lose its color, VI.

"……The Sixth Bullet <Vav>."

Kurumi murmured a little as she looked at Shidou's corpse.

Obviously, the Sixth Bullet <Vav > had regained its radiance after the kiss with Shidou.

Shidou could seal *reiryoku* through a kiss. Kurumi was well aware of that matter because of the investigation of her doppelgängers. Instead of the Sixth Bullet <Vav> being broken during the battle against Kotori, was it actually sealed up until now due to the prank kiss with Shidou?

If so, even if incomplete, but at that time, Kurumi's heart had begun to open to up to Shidou.

Kurumi twisted her lips with a self-deprecating feeling————the emotion of the defeated that had lost the match. Perhaps, from the very beginning, Kurumi lacked any chance for victory.

However, with sweat dripping from her forehead, Kurumi revealed a dazzling smile.

The Sixth Bullet <Vav>, which had been sealed up until the present, was <Zafkiel>'s best move.

If she had used this *power* she gained back unexpectedly, changing this outcome was not necessarily impossible.

It was terribly weak to call it hope——however it was enough to inspire Kurumi again.

But Kurumi had not yet paid the price.

To be accurate——in order to achieve her goal, even more sacrifice was required now.

"——We."

Kurumi quietly spoke in front of a row of clones that all started nodding as if understanding her intentions in a split second.

And so, she made a declaration.

“For Shidou-san’s sake——please die.”

Then the clones all began laughing, as if they were all well aware of her motives.

“Yes, yes, gladly.”

“Come on now, let’s all go on ahead.”

“This body from the very beginning has always been temporary.”

“Please use it to its fullest.”

“As long as this life can be used as a stepping stone for *me*.”

“Let’s go on to *Higan* with pleasure.”

“We can say something amusing now.”

“You can also use *me* if you want.”

“You won’t find it impossible to refuse.”

“Hahahaha.”

“Hahahaha.”

The clones merely laughed happily.

Certainly no one would remain intact in the end, nobody would survive.

However, from their expression, you couldn’t even see the slightest fragment of gloom.

Kurumi gave off a wry smile. The figures of the girls who shared the same appearance as her were unquestionably reliable. She couldn’t help but feel proud ——even though it would also be a type of narcissism.

“——Then, please follow me, *we*, for this unprecedented journey to the other world.”

Then, while chanting loudly, Kurumi raised her right arm holding the gun.

The name of the power that was once lost and regained with a great price.

The name of another *bullet* with the possibility to change this world.

“<Zafkiel>——the Sixth Bullet <Vav>.”

Kurumi directed the gun with *bullet* towards her temple——with a smile on her face she pulled the trigger.

◇◇◇

“＿＿＿＿”

Quite abruptly, she woke up.

No…… whether this fitted the description of *waking up* was a matter up for debate.

Anyway, after Kurumi regained consciousness, she immediately went to confirm the surrounding situation.

A dim room where only the minimum amount of furniture had been placed, it was one of the several strongholds that Kurumi had in the city.

On the wall hung a freshly cleaned uniform, and the date February 8th was displayed on the screen of the mobile phone prepared for gathering information.

So, Kurumi had returned.

February 8th, the day before Kurumi went back to Raizen High School.

“……Apparently it seems to have succeeded.”

<Zafkiel>——the Sixth Bullet <Vav>.

A bullet that allowed the target’s consciousness to return to a past body.

Although it depended on how much *time* was depleted, it could only be used to trace backwards up to a few days, far less than the extent capable with the Twelfth Bullet <Yud Bet>. However, at this moment, it wouldn’t be a metaphor to

say that it was a bullet where a single shot could be used to save the world.

——But the hard work would start from here. Kurumi went to grab a coat to wear, opened the door and left the room.

Then, while descending down the stairs of the abandoned building, she staggered on in the inaccessible alley, as she was talking to herself.

"——Well, it's time to move, we."

Then, in response to that, a tremendous number of responses ensued from the shadow.

"Yes, yes."

"There isn't much time."

"The enemy is Ellen Mathers and Artemisia Ashcroft."

"And those mysterious girls."

"For the moment, do you want to change the location from the open rooftop of where to call Shidou to?"

"No, then the other party will only change their attack strategy in haste. It's a bad move to let go of the advantage of knowing where the battle will occur."

"Then, let us suppress those we are going to attack."

"Yes, yes, that is the only thing that can be done."

"Please take into account the difference in fighting power of the enemy. We would be able to handle those girls, but those two Wizards are monsters. Ah, even if you introduce *us*, it will be difficult to stop both at the same time. There must be at least one ally, someone with power comparable to them."

"But I don't think it is possible to find such a convenient ally."

"No, no, there is still one person that we have."

"In my mind, there is one person, but it's a candidate that I don't want to rely on that much."

"That is——"

As she was about to ask, Kurumi suddenly flashed a bitter smile, having imagined the person that the clone was think about.

The clone not wanting to rely on *her* was reasonable enough. After all, *she* was probably the girl who had killed the largest number of Kurumi's clones.

"Well, that's unpleasant. But there is no one more suitable than her."

Kurumi raised her hand to release an instruction without letting the dialogue loosen her walking pace.

"——Us, please go to Mana-san's residence, rush there for emergency negotiations."

"Yes, yes."

"Roger that."

"In addition please form a separate group to explore the movements of DEM Industries. —— Looking from how even Kotori-san couldn't do anything, there's the possibility that they are using <Beelzebub> to find blind spots in their vigilance."

"Understood."

"Be careful."

"Perhaps, the other side also wants to immediately decide the outcome. I think that they will attack only once. Keep a close guard around Shidou-san. Do not let them the opportunity ——of killing Shidou-san. Make sure he thinks that there is no one outside, except for me, Tokisaki Kurumi."

As Kurumi spoke, the clones all smiled and laughed together.

"Ara, ara."

"Truly, me."

"Such a dangerous confession."

"……Uh."

Hearing these claims made Kurumi blush as her breathing became ragged. She stepped on the ground with her foot irritatingly.

After venting that out, Kurumi regained her determination as she turned to the front for a declaration.

“Come out, us——even if unintended, let us rescue and save this world.”

——Then, Tokisaki Kurumi’s battle began.

It took about six days’ worth of time.

But in those six days, Kurumi protected Shidou many times and had also repeatedly suffered the loss of Shidou several times.

The enemy was the cunning DEM Industries. Through the usage of the Demon King <Beelzebub>, they persistently seized every opportunity against Shidou’s life through the daughters of the demon king, the <Nibelcol>, and the strongest cards Ellen and Artemisia.

Even at the expense of sacrificing several *Kurumis*, going through a thousand measures, Kurumi continued fighting.

Every time Shidou died, she would use his lips to regain the Sixth Bullet <Vav>.

Again and again, the world was redone.

In the center of those disasters, fortunately the Sixth Bullet <Vav> only returned Kurumi’s memories.

Before Shidou could die, the consciousness would come back to a previous version of her body before regaining the Sixth Bullet. So the *time* used to fuel the Sixth Bullet <Vav> and the clones used to stop the enemy were reset to its original state.

After all the time needed to use the Sixth Bullet <Vav> was immense and the production of clones through the Eighth Bullet <Het> was not infinite.

If this reset was not established, the *time* held by Kurumi would have hit rock bottom already.

But in other words——it also meant the same for the enemy.

Even after killing a few <Nibelcol> and dismissing Ellen many times, the damage they received would be reset every time Kurumi utilised the Sixth Bullet <Vav>.

No——precisely due to not knowing they had fought Kurumi before, every time they would act in accordance to the same plan to kill Shidou.

The sole advantage that Kurumi held was a hell fire-like passion that burned by itself.

Once.

Ten times.

More than a hundred times.

While killing and being killed repeatedly, Kurumi gradually felt her own heart becoming fatigued.

Mechanically digesting the same events every time.

Only to be defeated by an abnormality different from the previous.

And in the core of this, the mind of the original Kurumi began to wear away in exhaustion.

But—— Kurumi never relinquished the gun in her hands.

Every time Shidou was killed.

And whenever she touched those stiff lips.

Kurumi wanted to be carried by that hand once again.

“Shidou-san…… hey, Shidou-san?”

How many times was it in the end?

Holding on to Shidou’s cold lips with her own——

“Let’s meet again……?”

Kurumi pulled the trigger at her own head.

◇◇◇

“What……”

While listening to eyepatch-Kurumi's story, Shidou gave out a sharp voice.

He could not help but touch his chest and head. Of course, there was no hole in his chest and his head was still attached to his neck.

"I…… was once dead?"

While being pointed to this unrealistic sensation, Shidou found it difficult to squeeze out that sentence from his throat.

At best, he used a strenuous amount of energy to unpleasantly emit that word. By admitting it with his own mouth, it was like remembering the illusion of denying his own life.

But eyepatch-Kurumi shook her head slowly in response to Shidou's words.

"No, that word is inaccurate."

Then she stared at Shidou's eyes while continuing.

"——204 times."

"Huh……?"

"That is——the number of times Shidou-san has died by the hands of DEM within that repetition of six days."

"————"

This time, no voice came out of Shidou.

204 times, this was far beyond the expected number, causing him to be momentarily dumbfounded.

Regardless, eyepatch-Kurumi continued.

"We were also keenly aware of it…… but frustratingly the terror of <Beelzebub> allowed them to strike at any opening, creating a variety of ways to harvest the life of Shidou-san.

"Hey, please wait, that kind of——"

To avoid saying something stupid, Shidou suddenly closed his lips and stopped mid-way of what he was speaking.

Although the method was different, Shidou had once traveled back in time with the help of Kurumi and changed history. No matter how absurd a story it was, he could not deny those words.

And more than anything——

"……"

Shidou saw the color of Kurumi's face after she had just fainted.

With that face, beyond her aloof demeanor was a girl who was all but completely exhausted.

Even if the *reiryoku* sealed within his body was the purpose, Kurumi had made a huge sacrifice to save Shidou's life. In fact, it was a dedication that Shidou could not easily describe.

Having guessed Shidou's thought process, eyepatch-Kurumi gently focused on him with her one eye.

"Like I said, every time, *we* would send the consciousness back to the past using the Sixth Bullet <Vav>. Again and again——Of course, only the consciousness goes beyond time. The time used and the dead clones will also return to their original state."

Then, eyepatch-Kurumi took in a deep breath.

"The mind of *me*, which was strained by repeating the same time over and over again, has reached its limit."

"……"

Shidou silently sighed as his line of sight once again fell down to Kurumi on the floor.

The appearance-same usual beauty——but there were also transient signs of frailness.

Understanding…… Yes, in order for Kurumi's goal to be achieved, the *reiryoku* sealed within Shidou's body was indispensable, and it was absolutely necessary to avoid letting Shidou be killed by DEM. So it was reasonable that Kurumi repeatedly saved his life through trial and error.

But there was one thing he could not comprehend.

Shidou looked on to the sleeping Kurumi while muttering to himself.

“Why…… didn’t you just immediately *eat* me……?”

Yes, it was incomprehensible for Shidou.

Certainly, being around the Spirits and <Ratatoskr>, it would be very difficult for Kurumi to succeed.

However, Kurumi could use the Sixth Bullet <Vav> to travel back to the same time as many times as possible. In that case, it was not impossible for her to exploit an opportunity in Shidou’s life.

However, Kurumi did not do that.

Abiding to the initial agreement, dating——and then revealing all of her secrets in order to seek Shidou’s understanding.

To Shidou——asking for help.

Even while exasperating her stamina, going as far to expose her sleeping posture to Shidou was something that could not usually happen.

“……Shidou-san.”

Eyepatch-Kurumi relaxed her mouth as she turned her line of sight towards Shidou.

“Please do not ask anything thoughtless, *me* is——”

——Suddenly.

Just as eyepatch-Kurumi was trying to say something, Kurumi, who should have been still lying down, moved her hand as a short gun materialized before firing off a bullet.

A bullet like a solid shadow of jet black struck eyepatch-Kurumi in the cheek and carved a small crater on the walall. After a moment, eyepatch-Kurumi opened her eyes while still in fright.

“……It seems there was a lot of enjoyment in talking while I was sleeping, *me*.”

Kurumi, with eyes half-open, slowly got up. On the other side, the clone was extending out her hands up in the air anxiously, but she merely ignored this while standing up.

"……Excuse me, Shidou-san. The young *me* in front of you seems to be going through a difficult phase."

Kurumi spoke while trying to suppress her dizziness by placing her hand on her forehead.

Despite her behavior being full of Kurumi's usual composure——but for Shidou, no matter what it seemed like she was trying to pull off a brave act. Shidou could not help but stretch out his hand to support her.

"Kurumi——"

"……"

Kurumi retired behind in order to avoid Shidou's hand.

However, he could not see things resembling feelings of disgust in that expression.

If anything, yes——it looked as if she was afraid of touching the hand.

Kurumi shook her shoulder as she seemed to be aware of her own facial expression, exposing an unfriendly smile to Shidou.

"——Please don't understand, Shidou-san. I helped Shidou-san because I would be troubled if that sealed *reiryoku* was lost."

"Ah, ah…… I understand."

Shidou was overwhelmed by the momentum to answer properly. As a result, Kurumi gently turned her back to him.

"……No interest ah, let's go this far for today."

"Ah——hey, Kurumi!"

Shidou reached out his hand while screaming, however—— As it was, Kurumi and her clone disappeared together into the shadows.

"……Kurumi——"

While watching the floor where Kurumi had disappeared into, Shidou clenched his fist.

Kurumi, Tokisaki Kurumi.

More horrible than anyone, more ruthless than anyone——a girl gentler than anyone.

The boy who was saved by her many times slowly raised his face.

That pair of eyes was marked with a brilliant spark of determination.

“This time… it’s my turn to save you…”

◇◇◇

On the roof of the building lit by the moonlight, a shadow expanded as if it was ink that had been spilled.

Kurumi looked out, taking in a deep breath as she exposed her body to the fresh air.

“……Fuh.”

Sure enough, there seemed to have been no strength left. Kurumi inhaled another deep breath while keeping her back against the railing.

Then, as if following her lead, the Kurumi from five years ago, with an eyepatch on her left eye, crawled out of the shadow.

Of course, she still left a large number of clones to protect Shidou. However, numerous clones, including this individual, decided to accompany Kurumi.

Yes, she was the culprit who had blurted a lot of unnecessary things to Shidou while Kurumi was unconscious. Kurumi glared at eyepatch-Kurumi with sullen eyes.

“——You’ve done something unnecessary, *me*.”

“Ara, ara.”

As Kurumi spoke, eyepatch-Kurumi appeared in a daze, placing her index finger on her chin while she adverted her eyes.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I merely thought Shidou-san looked

bored and decided to talk to him."

As eyepatch Kurumi pretended to know nothing, Kurumi cleared her throat as she twitched the edge of her brow.

"…… *Me*."

However, those words were not directed towards eyepatch-Kurumi.

As if responding to that command, the shadow below her feet began creeping as another Kurumi clone made a face as if imploring her to apologize.

"……Yes, *me*, this eyepatch was talking to Shidou-san about everything that happened during these last few days."

"Kihi~tsu!?"

With the betrayal of her fellow compatriot, eyepatch-Kurumi raised a shrill voice. Kurumi, with eyes half-closed, glared at her once again.

"Let me explain, *me*."

As Kurumi gave a groan while holding her hand on her chest, eyepatch-Kurumi waited for a while before making a serious shrug with her shoulders.

"Although it is indeed as you said, it is better to say that I do not understand why not, ah *me*.

The determination of *me* is not as usual as it is wishful, *me*. That is why despite the strong vigilance of *me*, it was that reason for exposing *my* sleeping appearance in front of Shidou-san."

"……Well."

Hurt by the painful point, Kurumi slightly wrinkled her brow as eyepatch Kurumi continued with her momentum.

"If so, who should be blamed for informing Shidou-san. And even Shidou-san would cherish the idea of *me* after saving him numerous times. What in the world are the disadvantages!"

"……"

Eyepatch Kurumi made a grand appeal while conducting her speech.

After a moment of silence, Kurumi replied with her cheek flushed.

"……It's not like that."

"Hm? What did you say?"

"There is no misunderstanding! Isn't my match with Shidou-san where the one who falls in love first loses!? Such a thing——if it was known that I did that to help Shidou-san, it would the same thing as being attached to Shidou-san……!"

"……Wow, *me*……?"

Eyepatch-Kurumi's eyes opened wide in surprise, as she soon shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Hehe…… Hahahahah, that's right, it's exactly as you said."

"……Somehow, I feel like a fool."

"It's your illusion."

Eyepatch-Kurumi continued to speak while shrugging her shoulders.

Meanwhile, Kurumi seemed unhappy as she wrinkled her brow.

——How did she get herself in this messy humbling position. Even if she wanted to use the Sixth Bullet <Vav> to travel back to before the fall , Shidou had not yet died in this timeline, so <Zafkiel> had not regained its power yet.

However, if she tried to kiss him while Shidou was still alive, the *reiryoku* that remained in Kurumi could also be sealed.

"So…… what are you going to do now, *me*? Even if the crisis has been averted for now, there isn't much time left, right?"

"……That's right."

Hearing the clone's words, Kurumi let out a distressed expression.

Fighting to keep Shidou alive was the prerequisite to continue. But in the case of *eating* Shidou—— Then.

"……You seem to be in distress."

"……!?"

At that moment, a voice other than the clone resounded in the darkness of the night. Kurumi nearly choked on her breath in the process.

Was it high or low, a man or a woman? It was impossible to tell from this strange voice.

It was a voice that Kurumi remembered. She immediately gave the command for her clones to begin as two old-style guns emerged from the shadows.

"……Oh, it doesn't seem like I'm much welcomed here. I'm only here to give advice."

It was impossible to distinguish the figure of the person from the sound of the voice.

While unknowingly standing on the corner of the roof, the shadow of a figure covered in mosaics. The image resolution of that person's existence remained very vague. Surely, there was someone there, but it was impossible to tell what was there.

Yes, it was the Spirit that Shidou and the others called <Phantom>.

Kurumi used to receive information several times from this Spirit. In fact the information about a boy called Itsuka Shidou was brought to her by <Phantom>.

But right now <Phantom> was no longer a cooperator to Kurumi.

No, certainly——it was an *enemy*.

"……Welcome? Me for you? Please temporarily leave the jokes aside."

As Kurumi cast a sharp gaze with her eyes, a few seconds later, <Phantom> gave out a sigh as if having guessed everything.

"……Oh, I see. You already know? ——Then there is no way around it. It's a pity, but it was true that I wanted to give advice though."

After saying that, <Phantom> made a slight movement forward.

"Did you think——you could escape……!?"

Accompanied by Kurumi's voice, all of the clones pulled the trigger together to fire a shower of bullet.

An endless number of black bullet rushed through the darkness at night and

attacked <Phantom>.

“————”

<Phantom> jumped to the sky, to avoid the bullet from the clones.

But that was within Kurumi’s wishes. In order to provide an opening for <Phantom> to escape, she didn’t want any of the clone to aim for above.

“<Zafkiel> ——the Seventh Bullet <Zayin>!”

Kurumi roared as she pulled the trigger.

Absolutely invincible, the Seventh Bullet <Zayin>, the shot which could stop time itself had pierced <Phantom>.

At that moment, the mosaic pattern stopped in the air perfectly.

“We!”

The next moment, the clones aligned their muzzles upward and fired their rounds.

Poor <Phantom> could not even speak while being showered in a hail of over 100 bullet.

——It seemed like that.

“……Ya-re, ya-re, you caught me off guard.”

“Wh——”

As a result of the voice coming in front of her, Kurumi unintentionally knitted her brows.

There was a massive clump of mosaic still in the sky. But the voice came from directly beneath the chunk.

On the ground of the roof, there was a woman squatting on her knees.

Yes, it was like she stopped the Seventh Bullet <Zayin> by leaving those *clothes* in the air while landing below.

“This is…… your true appearance, isn’t it?”

Kurumi did not hesitate to lift her gun while staring at the woman.

"……Well, that ought to be right. I didn't expect those barriers to be stripped away so beautifully. As expected of you——Kurumi."

While saying that, the lady slowly raised her face.

Looking at that face.

Kurumi's eyes widened.

"——Uh."

Long, messy hair could be easily recognized. A girl about twenty years old.

It looked like she had not slept for a long time. Her eyes had thick dark circles. And peering out of her pocket was a stuffed bear covered with scars.

"Murasame——sensei."

"……"

Kurumi called out the name of that woman——Murasame Reine, before returning to silence.

Yes, basked in moonlight was a teacher from the school that Kurumi had attended, Murasame Reine.

Of course, Kurumi knew that she wasn't just a teacher. She was a member of <Ratatoskr> led by Kotori, and also someone who also wanted Shidou to win her over.

However, even after taking that into consideration, it was incredibly surprising that existence was Reine.

——It didn't make sense, Phantom was Murasame Reine? Then the information that Kurumi received was—— "———————Ah."

However.

An extremely small voice squeezed out from Kurumi's throat."

"Yes… That way, ah, ah, ah, finally——everything adds up."

"……"

Hearing Kurumi's words, Reine gently narrowed her eyes as she kicked off from the floor.

She tried to escape with a jumping power impossible for a human being.

"——! We!"

Kurumi reverberated a fierce scream.

Then, the shadow on the floor creeped up the moment Reine landed, with countless hands seizing her body.

"……Kuh——"

Reine made a distorted facial expression while trying to escape from the *hands*.

However, it was ineffective. Eventually Reine was restrained by the many *hands*–

As if being *eaten* by the shadow.

"……"

For a moment, Kurumi murmured something with disgust just as Reine was passing her line of sight, about to be swallowed by the shadow.

"——You don't even deserve to go to helall."

Clouds enshrouded the moon as darkness filled the evening street.

To Be Continued

Afterword

Hello, everyone. My favourite Jack is Frisbee; I'm Tachibana Koushi.

Date A Live Volume 16 Kurumi Refrain has reached your hands. How is it? I'd be elated if you loved it.

Thus arrives Kurumi's arc at long last, of whom hasn't made an appearance in quite a while.

Although you've probably seen her often in the short stories, the feeling just isn't the same.

During the early third volume, Kurumi could have well joined the initial harem of Spirits, but due to her not being sealed, she has been moving in the dark ever since. For her to crop up in the cover and title, it sure has been a long journey. The illustration of her looking back is really cute, not to mention her sexy thigh peeking out.

Not only the front cover, but also the inside. All of the colored illustrations have Kurumi in them; it's a first. As expected of Kurumi.

I'll hold back on the spoilers as I think some of you may be reading the afterword prior to the actual story, so this and that and this scene and that scene.

Come to think of it, Kurumi's the first character created in Date A Live.

Although to be precise, the current Kurumi is slightly different; her prototype was designed when I started writing this novel during my second year of high school.

A Gothic Lolita with uneven hair and a clock for her left eye. My state of mind was truly beyond description: "This character has potential, and one day I'll show her to the world."

Ten years later, I still firmly believe in my passion from then.

I remember my original draft: she was an artificial magician who had a special clock implanted in her left eye, capable of utilizing particular abilities at the cost of her own lifespan. At the activation of one, the clock would tick faster, causing her to lose an equal amount of her time.

As a result, there would be characters other than her who possessed clocks too, but basically those with them on the back of their palms or chests would be more, so only she would have one in her eyeball. Something like that.

And of course, Kurumi wouldn't be the main heroine. She'd become the insane sister character targeting the main heroine's life, saying, "Hihihihihi, ne, Onee-sama?" A line like that, so spine-chilling.

By the way, while out of topic, the prototype of Kusanagi Neon from my debut work <Soukyuu no Karma> also appears in that story. This character's a personage among the military and also the strongest one, so he would have clocks in both of his hands, shoulders, and chest. Very powerful.

Somehow discussing my previous works really makes me embarrassed.

But this time's fantastic - Kurumi's volume, Kurumi's spin-off, Tsunako-san's third art book released in March! Threes galore!

Tsunako-san's art book also has a short story included, so please check it out! Alongside never-before-seen exclusive illustrations……!?

The Kurumi spin-of written by Higashide Yuichiro, Date A Bullet, is extremely cutely, solidly, and violently done in style. I simply love Furue-chan. And Aiai-chan's cute too. Because all these adorable girls are present, I'm sure all of you will hold tea parties together. What a warm sight. There's also an announcement at the end, so please have a look! NOCO-san's Kurumi is immensely beautiful!

Speaking of the ending, an outline of the newly revived airship, <Fraxinus EX Celsior>, introduced in Volume 14 has also been inserted!

The design was done by Ebikawa Kanetake-san, who also drew <Fraxinus>! I hope you appreciate the even sharper and cooler version, <Fraxinus EX>!

As always, this book has been released owing to the efforts of many.

Illustrator Tsunako-san, the image of Kurumi standing among her clones is superb. Editor-san, please forgive the delays caused up till now. Designer Kusano-san, thank you for your excellent designs every time. Isn't it time to worry about the title logo deployment, kukuku……

Spin-off writer Higashide-san, NOCO-san, <Fraxinus> Designer Ebikawa-san, everyone in the Publishing Department, those involved in retail and distribution, as well as you holding this book right now, you all have my utmost gratitude.

Next up is Volume 17. How will this and that turn out? (Keeping it spoiler-free) I'll

do my best to bring it to you, hoping it meets your expectations.

With that, I look forward to seeing you in the upcoming volume.

February 2017,

Tachibana Koushi

Date A Live - Volume 16 - Kurumi Refrain

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